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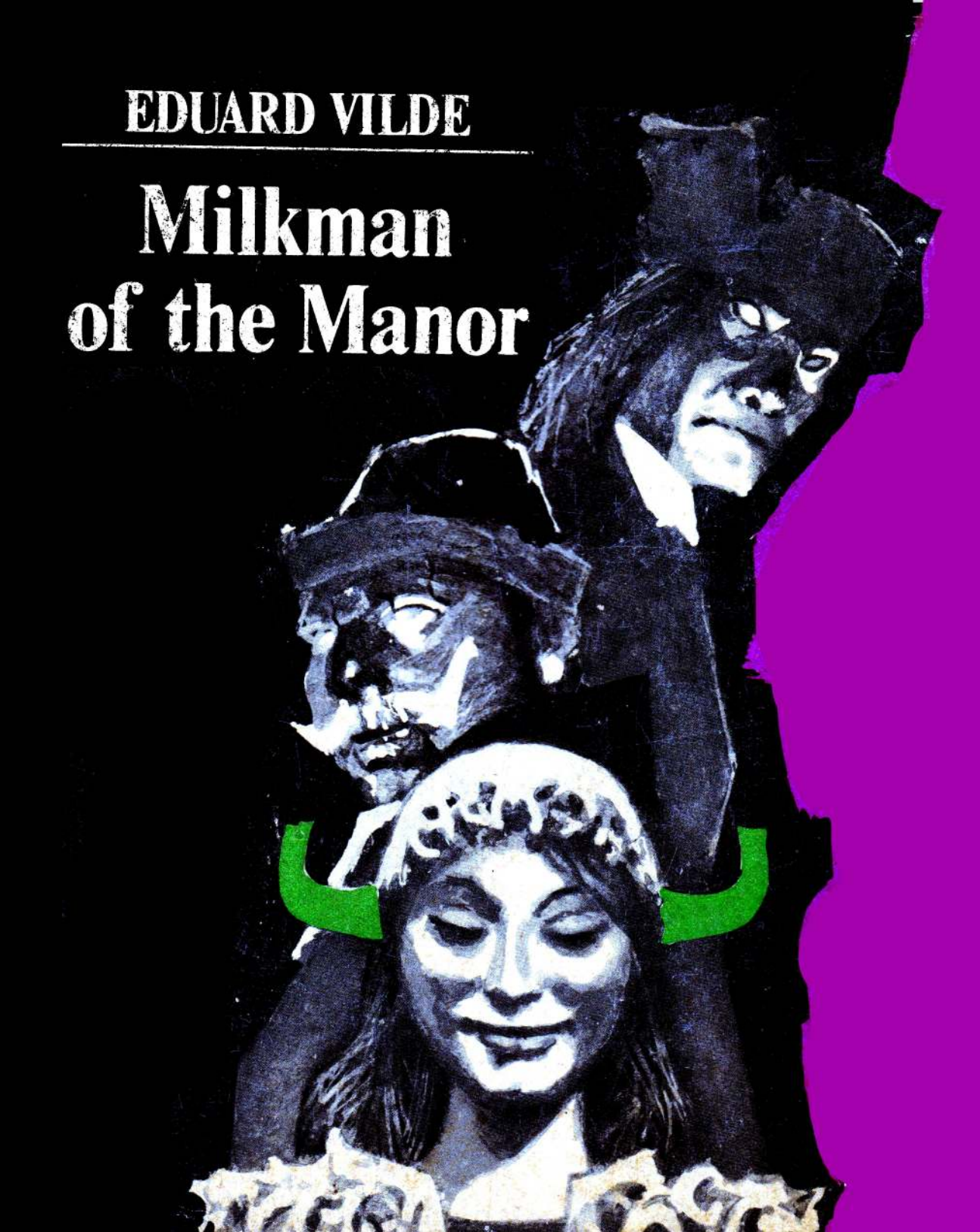

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Milkman of the Manor

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by M. Rauk

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EDUARD VILDE AND HIS NOVEL MILKMAN OF THE MANOR

1.

It is an established fact that, in the past, the master artists of large nations are in a better position to add something to the sum total of world culture than are the gifted and talented sons of a small nation. This is more than true for the writers of a numerically small people for the simple reason that the languages in which they write are little known.

Our northern neighbours, the Finns, can hardly be listed among the large nations of the world; nevertheless, if their great musician and composer, Jean Sibelius, had not molded his genius in the language of music, but had poured it into books in his mother tongue, spoken by only a few million Finns, hardly would his contribution to world culture have been as great as it is now, when he gave mankind *Finlandia, Valse triste*, seven majestic symphonies and other compositions, which are written in an international language that requires no translation. The Finnish writers Aleksis Kivi, Eino Leino and even Frans Emile Sillanpää, who was awarded a Nobel Prize, have never won such worldwide popularity as Sibelius, despite the fact that their contribution to the national culture of Finland is equal to his.

The Estonians, numbering about a million in all, who live on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea between the Gulfs of Finland and Riga, with their hundred-year-old tradition of Song Festivals have given birth to a good many composers, but not a single one comparable with Sibelius. Yet in the field of literature we have such classics as Eduard Vilde and

Anton Hansen-Tammsaare, who easily stand comparison with the best Finnish writers. The first mentioned, E. Vilde, was elected Honorary Member of the Society of Finnish Men of Letters and Honorary Doctor of Tartu University; while our southern neighbours, the Latvians, endeavoured to set up A. H. Tammsaare's candidature for a Nobel Prize.

Since 1940 Estonia has been part and parcel of the multinational Soviet Union. From that time on the publication of books in Estonian has greatly expanded. A case in point is the novel *Milkman of the Manor,* which was first published in 1916 in 2500 copies, while its 1974 impression appeared in 40,000 copies. At the same time there have been numerous translations of Estonian books into Russian and other languages of the peoples of the Soviet Union, as well as into foreign languages, of which the present English publication is one more witness.

Eduard Vilde was born on March 4, 1865, in the Estland Gubernia of Tsarist Russia, in the county of Virumaa, in a farm-labourer's cottage at the Pudivere estate owned by a Baltic-German baron. His father was a quiet man, hard-working and extremely duty-conscious, who worked on the estate as overseer, though the job was not in character with his mild nature. Consequently, he soon found more congenial employment at another estate as the baron's storehouse keeper. Vilde's mother was the exact opposite of her husband. She was lively by nature, a lover of song and music, a poet at heart, who could, on occasion, improvise a verse or two on any vital topic. She was impatient, at times, with her husband's submissiveness to the baron's wishes.

Vilde himself considered all his inheritance to stem from the maternal side. And, in truth, his mother's nephew, Eduard Bornhöhe, also became a writer, well-known in Estonia as the author of historical novels. Still, it cannot be denied that Vilde's father's personality also had an influence on the son's development.

Vilde's school-days ended abruptly at the age of seventeen, when he was attending the Tallinn County School, from which he was expelled for initiating a trip to America half a year before graduation. Following in the footsteps of his cousin, Eduard Bornhöhe, he took up his pen and that same year wrote a story *The Path of Crime.* From that day to the end of his life (he was nearly sixty-nine when he died December 26, 1933) Vilde remained true to his chosen vocation of "Penman".

At that time, under the cramped conditions of a small nation within the great Russian Empire, the term "penman" covered a wide range of meanings. There were no professional writers in Estonia at the end of the nineteenth century. Penmen had no choice but to work on the editorial staff of some contemporary newspaper, where they were editors as well as dispatchers, being responsible for the subject matter of the articles as well as for the circulation of the papers when they left the printing press. Vilde himself later commented on that period of his life: "I crossed out this and I underscored that; five days a week I patched up articles and wrote copy, waded through printers' proofs — on the sixth I was busy with glue-pot and brush, string, paper-wrappers and subscribers' addresses."

Such were the conditions under which Vilde worked at the editorial offices of almost all the more important Estonian newspapers, one after another. As year followed year, the glue-pots and paper-wrappers were discarded and he was able to devote himself more and more to the writing of original stories. From time to time he left his native land for St. Petersburg, Riga, Berlin, Moscow. Nevertheless, after a sojourn abroad, whether long or short (a year in Riga, nearly two in Berlin) he always returned to Estonia.

While working on the editorial staff of the newspaper *Postimees* (Postman) in the year 1893, he was in close contact with the members of a democratic group of progressively-minded students from Latvia. Referring to this group, Vilde wrote to a friend: "There is a scientific association of Latvian students here, who are keenly interested in the problems of national economy. The members are of various nationalities, about six or seven Estonian students, some Russians — all with the same aspirations, who enjoy cordial fellowship. I have joined the group as a beginner. Of late I have been reading scientific literature which really makes a man into a thinking human being. History, national economy, social politics, philosophy — everything now stands out for me in quite a new light."

By the end of that period, which extends over the first dozen years of his career as a penman, Vilde had written scores of longer and shorter stories and a countless number of sketches and comic skits, which all made good reading, but in the majority will always rank as second-rate literature. In the year 1896, when his novel *Banished to the Bleak Land* was first published, Vilde's genius made a sudden upswing, a qualitative rise,

which proves how the creative work of a writer is favourably influenced by his coming into close contact with the progressive ideas of his time.

Banished to the Bleak Land became the most-read and best-loved novel, especially among the poorer peasantry of Estonia. It is said that a farm-hand, at the christening of his new-born son, not only wanted the name "Eduard" given to the child, but insisted that the surname of the writer also be added. But the name "Vilde" is not a conventional given name in Estonia (nor in other countries, most likely) and the schoolmaster, who was performing the christening rites, could not consent. So the farm-hand's son had to be content with only one christian name — Eduard.

Vilde's historical novels *The War at Mahtra, When the Men of Aniya Went to Tallinn* and *Prophet Maltsvet* won the author still greater love and popularity. The first two of these were written on the eve of the 1905 Revolution and their influence on the development and maturing of revolutionary ideas in Estonia was of no small significance.

The subject matter and historical background of the novel *The War at Mahtra* was the peasant uprising in Juuru parish in northern Estonia in the year 1858, to which oral tradition has given the name "war". The peasants of the Mahtra estate had refused to pay their quit-rent, and when the landlord, a German baron, sent for government troops to punish the insurgents, some two thousand peasants attacked the well-armed soldiers with clubs and stones (of which there is no lack in Estonia); they killed the officer in command and burnt the manor-house to ashes. What followed was unspeakable horror: the court-martial sentenced sixty peasants to death, the rest received heavy corporal punishment. Though the death sentence was later suspended, the accused were made to run the gauntlet and then banished to Siberia, which proved to be no lighter a punishment than the death penalty, because for many it soon ended in death.

In 1902 Vilde presented this historic drama in the form of a novel to the readers of the newspaper *Teataja* (Informer), published in Tallinn. In those days a coverage of the events at Mahtra could be published only as a work of fiction, for no censor would have allowed it to appear as a scientific treatise in the history column of any newspaper.

On publication, Vilde's novel *The War at Mahtra* was at once acknowledged as a major achievement and became even more popular than *Banished to the Bleak Land.*

After the 1905 Revolution, Vilde fled the country and was forced to live abroad until 1917. During his emigration he remained a short time in the United States of America. From there he went to Denmark and lived in Copenhagen for five years. This period of his life was exceptionally fruitful — not so much in the number of books he wrote, as in the artistic value of what he wrote. He had just reached the threshold of his fifties and attained his creative maturity. His own evaluation of everything he had written in his youth are aptly expressed in the following words: "Every line is money, every line means bread. So, more lines, old chap!" But now he spoke of himself and his work in quite another way: "Now I don't simply write lines. I wish to carve in stone. I want to hew tablets of stone and cut words on them, words that wind and rain will not erase."

Among Vilde's novels and plays that "wind and rain will not erase" are to be listed the works written in Copenhagen: *Pisuhänd**, a comedy; *An Illusive Mystery,* a drama; and especially his last novel *Milkman of the Manor.*

Vilde left Copenhagen after the February Revolution in Russia in 1917 and returned to his native land. At the beginning the writer had high hopes for the future of bourgeois Estonia, but as time went on he grew more and more disillusioned. In this — the last period of his life — he wrote nothing new or significant, but settled down to revise all that he had written so far in preparation for the publication of his "Complete Works".

In 1933, the last year of his life, Vilde's genius flared up again like a torch. The fascists in Germany were pushing to power and Estonian fascists were beginning to stir themselves. Vilde, the writer, whose name was known to every Estonian, young and old, once more took up the struggle. He wrote a flaming declaration against the new terror and savagery — fascism. Vilde's declaration was circulated in thousands of copies, and most assuredly it had a share in preventing fascism in its crudest form being victorious in Estonia.

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* Pisuhänd — a mischievous elf or gnome of Estonian folklore, similar to the German *Kobold* and the Irish *Leprecaun.*

2.

It has been maintained long since that everything moves, everything changes — and it has been reasoned that this eternal motion and changing is all that will remain and nothing else. Contrarily, there is also an adage which contends that the more things change, the more everything remains the same at the core.

On the surface, the plot of *Milkman of the Manor* seems to be hackneyed and out-dated. The same theme, however, has been used by many authors even up to this day. The gist of the plot is that, from mercenary or political reasons a man connives to pass his wife on to some lover. In Decameron's tenth tale of the ninth day stories a husband lets the priest change his wife into a mare by the occult arts, hoping thereby to get rich; but when the priest provides the "mare" with a "tail", he is frightened out of his wits. There is a parallel in Anton Chekhov's short story *Anna round his Neck* where blind ambition for rank and power takes hold of a government official who does his utmost to get the "Anna Order" decoration. Consequently he steers his young wife, Anna, into the orbit of "His Excellency". And when, in the course of events, little Vladimir is in the offing, the cuckoldy husband has hopes of wearing a still higher decoration, the "Vladimir Order" on his breast, side by side with his "Anna". In the works of the great men of literature there are many examples of moral baseness and treachery perpetrated not only by conjugal partners but also by brothers and sisters, parents and children. The contemporary American writer, Erskine Caldwell, for instance, has written a story where a bankrupt farmer willingly traded his twelve-year old daughter for a sack of turnips to an old railwayman, knowing that he would make her his sex mate.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century capitalism was rapidly penetrating into the rural economy of northern Estonia, which is the scene of the events described in Eduard Vilde's novel *Milkman of the Manor.* The age of serfdom and statute labour was past, the landlords had started selling farmsteads for cash on a large scale to their former peasants and tenant farmers. And it was the dream and ambition of the recently widowed peasant tenant, Tõnu Prillup, to purchase such a farm for his very own. Because there must be a woman in the house to tend the cow and look after the two children, he soon leads his late wife's sister, Mari, to the altar.

Further, their landlord, an old bachelor, Baltic-German Baron Ulrich von Kremer, falls in love with Prillup's youthful wife. The Baron offers the profitable milk-carrying business of Mäeküla to Prillup if the latter agrees to influence Mari to become his mistress. For a long time Mari obstinately refuses to listen to her husband's earnest pleading, until at last, driven principally by a strong sense of duty to her husband, she acquiesces. However, the story of the aging landlord and the cottar's youthful wife is merely the background for the drama of the peasant tenant Tõnu Prillup, to which ... "the whole development of the conflict as well as the motivation for the actions of all the other characters of the novel, and the setting as a whole, are subordinated. Strictly speaking, *Milkman of the Manor* is the story of Prillup, and its principal problem is Prillup's desire to feather his nest at all costs ... With convincing psychological analysis and masterful artistic imagery Vilde has shown Prillup's suffering in the process of bending Mari to his will, which at the same time is the beginning of his moral decline." (Prof. Villem Alttoa.)

Though the plot of *Milkman of the Manor* may be hackneyed, nevertheless, in the personality of Prillup, Vilde has given a singularly new and unique image to Estonian literature which will also, through the translation of the novel, enrich the international gallery of literary images. In Boccaccio's tale, the fool of a husband who lets the priest change his wife into a mare by magic is depicted as a comic figure; Chekhov treats the ambitious government official in *Anna round his Neck* with disdainful irony, to say the least; but Vilde's attitude towards the poverty-stricken peasant tenant is deeply humane. Without passing judgment on Prillup, without deriding him, or even feeling sorry for him, Vilde simply understands him and his motives. Moreover, in understanding Prillup to the core, Vilde passes even harsher judgment on the social conditions under which the peasant must live. He achieves this with the well-chosen devices of a great artist, and that much stronger is the impact.

Vilde does not pretend to be Prillup's prosecutor, or his solicitor either, but rather an expert who knows Prillup through and through; or he is merely an associate — to say friend would be too much — to whom the cottar Prillup has confided all his troubled thoughts and secret aspirations, even if they seem queer and ethically shocking.

The image of the landlord, Ulrich von Kremer, is vividly and plausibly

drawn from Vilde's prototype, and as a character he is depicted with considerable irony. Also, in molding Mari's personality Vilde has the mental image of some prototypes before his eyes, as the literary critic Karl Mihkla confirmed when he followed up the genesis of the novel *Milkman of the Manor*. Still, it is just the interpretation of Mari's image that has brought forth the greatest differences of opinion among Estonian literators. There are those who assess Mari's conduct as "shameful and morally abominable", and diametrically opposite opinions of those who are charmed by "Mari's interesting and incomparably unique character", and there are those who do not altogether agree with either of the above opinions.

One thing is certain: when Prillup's insistence became unbearable and Mari went to the lord of the manor, she did not do so as a thoughtless and flighty young girl, but rather from a deep sense of duty and, in a way, because she was allured by the material advantages that the promised milk-carrying business would give Prillup, and his family, too. A few hundred years back it would not have been necessary for the landlord to tempt Mari or her husband with promises; he would have ordered her to the manor-house and exercised his tenuous feudal rights over her body (*jus primae noctis*), as actually happened on the 26th day of August in 1756, when the lord of the manor, Colonel von Schwartz, ordered Liisu, a slave girl, the beautiful daughter of Pärtli-Yaan, to come to the bath-house at the manor, where Liisu stabbed him to death with seven thrusts of a knife, for which crime she was whipped with ten pairs of rods, then sentenced to imprisonment and sent to Siberia. Had Mari been summoned to the baron's bath-house instead of Liisu a century and a half earlier, would she have done the same? It is difficult to say. The law of that time, feudal law, condemned Liisu to life imprisonment; but in their hearts and in their songs, the enslaved people condemned Colonel von Schwartz and justified Liisu.

Vilde neither condemns nor justifies Mari for going to the manor-house at the end of the nineteenth century under conditions of rapidly developing rural capitalism; as a writer Vilde does not sit in judgment over Prillup and Mari. In a way his attitude towards them brings to mind what Maxim Gorky once said — that every crime is a social crime. In feudal times crimes and criminals were peculiar to feudalism; capitalism gave rise to its own peculiar crimes and criminals, moral decline and the struggle to do away

with them. But still there is something unyielding in human nature, something that is hard to change — which perhaps explains why certain themes, though they are hoary with age, still live on in fiction and drama.

If the numerically small Estonian people have anything worthwhile to contribute to the treasury of World Literature, then Vilde's *Milkman of the Manor* is undoubtedly a part of the legacy.

Aadu Hint
President of the Estonian Book
Friends' Society

Tallinn,
July, 1974

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The Russian translation of Ed. Vilde's *Milkman of the Manor* has made this superb work of art available to the wide reading public of the Soviet Union.

My work on the first English translation of *Milkman of the Manor* has been greatly helped by Augusta North, American delegate to the Conference of African and Asian Writers (Alma-Ata, Sept. 1973), who kindly undertook to edit the manuscript and make some useful suggestions.

I am moreover greatful to Mrs. North for the keen interest she took in my endeavour to give another pair of wings to this classic of Estonian literature.

The translation has duly collated with the text of the original by Clarissa Parts to whom I am deeply indepted for her willing cooperation.

M. Rauk

CHAPTER ONE

At about nine o'clock the front door of the manor-house yawns sleepily, as usual, and lets out the lord of the manor, for just at that hour after breakfast Ulrich von Kremer, all alone, begins the first round over his estate while he is in residence there during the warm season from St. George's Day* till Michaelmas**.

As the years go by, the Squire of Mäeküla Manor seems to show very little change in his outward appearance: always the same dark blue cheviot coat with shiny sleeves and front, baggy with long use, its tails a lighter blue from too much sitting; and the same blue waistcoat with tell-tale traces down the front of food stains, some of fairly recent date, which indicate, by the way, that soft-boiled eggs are a staple item on von Kremer's breakfast menu. The same old greenish-black cap covers his head, like a pancake, the faded top sagging forward, the stiff peak dulled by age and constant use; and the same old grey and brown striped English trousers, whose threadbare knees and ragged cuffs speak too eloquently of long-lost youth and elegance. The only tokens of wealth about him are the heavy signet-ring with a shield ornamentation, that he wears behind the huge bulging joint of his index finger, and the solid gold watch-chain glistening on his waistcoat, with a massive Swiss timepiece suspended from it — which now seldom sees the light of day — and is known to be a

* St. George's Day — April 23, moving day for tenants, hiring-day for farm labourers.

** Michaelmas — September 29, a quarter day when payments, rents etc. were due.

priceless heirloom on whose dented covers the engraving has rubbed out long ago.

The man himself, nicknamed Mäeküla Bismarck by the intellectuals of the neighbourhood because of a certain comic likeness in face and feature to the German Reich Chancellor, has already reached that stable age where a dozen new wrinkles round the eyes or a couple of new folds under the chin hardly make any difference — no more difference than a little more grey in the beard or an extra roll of fat on the neck, or a sagging of the knees. As a matter of fact, the Kremers age slowly — perhaps because they are born old.

Descending the narrow stone steps, which number only three, von Kremer plants his feet firmly on the lawn, whose wide smooth expanse covers the stretch of gently rolling ground in front of the house, extending down to the marshy meadow. Then, resting his ungloved hands — one of which holds a stout juniper stick — on the small of his back, he sets out slowly but steadily, like an overladen schooner, and steers his course round the southern side of the house.

Sharp-eyed observers contend that, while he is still in the vicinity of the manor-house, he seldom takes the trouble to look at anything around him with proprietory solicitude. His downcast eyes are fixed on the ground at his feet. And if by chance he happens to raise his glance to some building, he mutters something, shrugs his shoulders, shakes his long whiskers and quickens his step.

*"Verflixt — der Dalles!"**

There is no denying the fact that many things here ought to be different — and the smallness of the estate alone cannot explain that away. The cowshed and the stable are no exception — the cowherd doesn't even dare to blow his horn near them for fear they might cave in. And the old straw-thatched servants' quarters, a relic of serfdom, can hardly be said to enhance the entrance to the estate; not to mention the overgrown tangle of an orchard that has run wild for the want of a gardener and yields nothing edible except for a few currants and some wormy raspberries. Most of all the manor-house itself, his own dwelling, makes the baron mutter, though

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* That damned poverty! *(Baltic-German dialect.)*

not so often now, for time has dulled his senses, and von Kremer is not a sensitive man.

"Verflixt — der Dalles!"

The manor-house, rather small and unpretentious, according to plan, in keeping with the moderate size of the estate, still stands unfinished as it has stood for the greater part of two decades already. And if times do not change for the better, of which, alas, there is no sign yet, it will remain half-built for ever. To a stranger, seeing it from afar, it might resemble an old saw-mill, except that it stands on a hill, too far from the river. Only the lower stone storey of the building, designed in the style of an Upper-Bavarian villa, is finished and the windows blinking in the whitewashed walls somehow manage to give it the air of a habitation. But the unfinished wooden upper storey and everything else that would have given it the aspect that was originally planned, are in the sad state of a dilapidated crate. Only the beams, rafters and protruding rigde-poles suggest the wide open balcony around the second storey, while the doors and windows in its grey weatherbeaten log walls are gaping holes only partly boarded up. The recently patched shingle roof and the freshly whitewashed chimney pots all go to make the scarred exterior appear still more incongruous, so that the edifice brings to mind the skeleton of a monster from which the hawks have devoured the flesh.

The house might well have been an embellishment to the landscape instead of an eye-sore, for the building site was chosen with a fine sense of beauty on the highest part of an elevation, just where it begins to slope down towards a stream. From the upper storey there would have been, on one side, a fine view of low-lying green meadowlands and the meandering stream with its sluggish pitch-black water; on the other side, shrub-fringed fields would meet the eye, and the high church-steeple, and the village beyond. On the west and north side the windows would have revealed a picturesque landscape of gently rolling uplands, where oak groves, clumps of pine and fir, and clusters of hazel give way to young birch woods, and between these appear pale glades of turfy grazing-land dotted with dark green barberry bushes.

Yes, this is where the finished manor-house should have stood! All Kremer's kith and kin at Särgvere had for once been in agreement nineteen years ago when they had declared unanimously: "Ulrich

will have a lovely house. Ulrich will have a house worth showing to people!"

And now . . .

"Der Dalles, der Dalles — verflixt!"

This tiresome creature, on whom Ulrich lays all the blame, is not a frequent visitor in the households of the Baltic German barons, yet he seems to have taken up permanent residence with three generations of Kremers. He had made his first appearance as a tiny little fellow, but in the course of time had grown into a full-sized man. Where he came from — nobody knows, for none of the Kremers had ever been profligates or spendthrifts in the full sense of the word. Evidently the explanation offered by the stewards must be accepted as the right one, namely that the soil was poor, that the peasants were lazy and light-fingered, that the manor-house had been blessed with too many children, especially girls. This, however, did not prevent the stewards from lining their own pockets and, after a few years of faithful service, being able to rent farms and buy houses in town.

It was said, however, that there had been one Kremer in an earlier generation, who had indeed wasted lots of money and helped "Dalles" to grow from boyhood to manhood. As a child, this Kremer had revealed extraordinary cleverness at card-playing, which had induced his elders to decide on a diplomatic career for him, in the hope, of course, that his services would bring honour to the family as well as to the fatherland.

However, the Kremers could hardly be reproached for being ambitious. They had so little of that quality, as a rule, that they did not even strive to be listed among the "successful farmers" of the district; and the few who had sallied forth to try their fortune in the army or in the civil service, had always, with touching unselfishness, let others be promoted over their heads. Nobody could recall that a Kremer ever made any persistent effort to gain a post in the organs of local government, and even less are they known to have ever striven towards fame through the channels of art and science. So now, after several generations of Kremers had not been able to boast of a single genius in the family — no field marshals or commanding generals or ministers of state or governors, or even the Head of the Knighthood — and when suddenly there appears a child with a streak of ambition

so clearly defined — well, dear me, why not help him on? And so it happened that this particular Kremer became a diplomat.

Soon, however, it turned out that the ladder he had to climb in order to reach the desired goal, starting from ministerial offices, passing through consulates and embassies, had to be plated with a thicker layer of gold than his parents and relatives in backwoods Särgvere had foreseen. The ambassador and would-be minister had constantly complained that lack of money was the obstacle in his path, and when he finally managed to rise to the rank of attaché in London, he had especially deplored his paucity of funds, despite the fact that he had only recently bettered his condition considerably by marrying money. His parents and nearest relatives had then worked wonders in the way of selfdenial, and both the Särgvere and Mäeküla estates had been deeply undermined by mortgage loans, but still the London attaché had considered their support miserly. Thus he had continued in the capacity of attaché until his difficulties led him into temptation at the card-table of one of the most aristocratic Tory clubs in London. And there something happened which is not recorded in the Kremers' family chronicle, but which brought Götz von Kremer's diplomatic career to an abrupt end. It was no secret that all through his years of service the diplomat had remained true to the devil's picturebook, to which he had been so ardently devoted in childhood.

An outsider can hardly be expected to analyse how and to what extent the matrimonial status of the Kremers of the present generation was affected by the harm that was done at that time to the Särgvere and Mäeküla estates, or how each Kremer feels about it personally — most likely they haven't got it all clear themselves. So the reader will have to be content to accept the simple fact that the six Kremers, three brothers and three sisters, who share the ownership of the two estates, have all remained single. The small Mäeküla Manor suckles Ulrich alone, all the others suck the udder of Särgvere, although Adalbert, the eldest, is the nominal head of that estate. In spite of a severely simple mode of living, almost petty bourgeois in its austerity, even the sizable Särgvere estate has long been going downhill, so that Heinrich von Kremer, the youngest of the brothers, is obliged to augment his income by earning a tradesman's salary at a post in town, where he works as an official in the Credit Association of the Nobility. Otherwise it is doubtful whether he would have been able to keep

up his two favourite hobbies: the collecting of rare cigarette-holders, ash-trays, napkin-rings and pocket knives, and keeping a sleek and good-looking valet in his employ instead of hiring a servant-girl, which would, of course, have been far cheaper.

As the Kremer of Mäeküla now takes his morning walk, he adheres to a simple principle — to avoid everything that might quicken his pulse, for he wants to live long and one of the valves of his heart is not quite sound. For this reason he moves along slowly but steadily, keeping a wide berth between himself and those people who might annoy him — and most of all the steward on whose shoulders he has shifted all the worries of household management, for on the face of this taciturn man he can invariably read how many ploughs, harrows, carts and even more expensive farm implements must be procured without delay. Moreover, before leaving the house, he never forgets to put in the back pocket of his frock coat a piece of white bread with which he drives away the craving for tobacco, strictly forbidden for his heart's sake by the family doctor. As for his thoughts, he carefully directs them towards peace, joy and innocence, and towards Särgvere in particular. For the company of his brothers and sisters at Särgvere, where he stays during the winter months and spends all his Sundays during the summer, and where the town brother always comes in his off-hours, constitutes his whole world.

However, it would be vain to expect that in this same world six minds should work alike and six hearts could beat as one. As it happens, contending factions can be formed and stubborn battles fought in the Kremer family by reason of disagreement on such weighty problems as whether sister Yakooba's jams began to ferment because the amount of sugar was not right, or because they were stored in a damp place; or how many hens should there be to one cock if they are to lay well; or whether cats can be washed with warm water and soap like dogs — all important issues though they do not exactly determine the destiny of Europe nor even the fate of the family, for that matter. Sometimes the Kremers are split into two parties, sometimes into six — depending on whether the items added to the agenda are brand new or hoary with age. And the battle ends, as a rule, only when no combatants are left on the battle-field, having one by one jumped up from the table and disappeared into their respective rooms with the loud echo of a slamming door. From there they eventually emerge with an olive

branch, after a period of time which might range from one hour to two days, the length depending on the individual temperament of each participant.

But the unsound valve of Ulrich von Kremer's heart seems to be immune to this kind of acceleration of his pulse beat. In fact, the valve is so well accustomed to it that its very absence might be harmful. For no price would Ulrich exchange these altercations for those distressing pangs of nostalgia that he once experienced when he was forced to stay away from Särgvere for more than a week — the feeling that twists and turns inside and sometimes even wrings tears from the eyes, especially in the silent dusk of evening, when long shadows come creeping up to the windows. At such moments the old gentleman is overwhelmed with sadness and self-pity.

When, in the course of his morning walk, Herr von Kremer has passed through the gate and reached the smithy, he usually chooses the longest of the lanes that cross there — namely the one that goes to the dairy-farm. Like all the other lanes at Mäeküla, this one is badly paved — deep rutted, stoney and clayey in places. It runs along the slope of the ridge, hedged by shrubs and bushes with gaps here and there, which give glimpses of the entire hillside and the spreading fields in the hollow. Then the soil turns sandy and the sparse pine-woods begin, and soon the dairy-farm on a bald hillock comes to view, one slope facing the peat-bog, the other looking towards a hamlet and some scattered huts on the edge of field and pasture.

Going along this lane the walker often stops to take breath. He sits down on a tussock, or lies down on the sward, stretches out his legs and waves his stick, mutters, yawns and feels happy in the knowledge that he is alive, that he exists. And not merely exists, but exists as the hereditary Squire of Mäeküla — exists as an individual who really possesses a particle of the Earth, who has a roof of his own to live under, his very own without the shadow of a doubt, and who still has the right to order and command, and who is still respected, and who need not fear anyone. And the grass grows and the grain ripens, and the cows give milk, and the tenants pay him rent and the cottagers do the work in his fields. Yes-yes-ahm-ahm! He yawns with relish, a yawn which embodies the whole pattern of his life, his activities, and his attitude towards everything else.

Baron von Kremer usually makes a longer stop near the herd if it happens to be grazing within sight of his route, and then an expression of fatherly solicitude comes into his eyes and he solemnly moves the long tusks of his grey whiskers with deep satisfaction. For are not these one hundred and forty teats — too few, really, and not of the best breed — the mainstay of his whole economy? Potatoes lag far behind, and marketable grain still farther, if there happens to be any grain for sale. And he scratches one or two cows between the horns, calling them by name, and thrusts a piece of bread into the mouth of another, and honours Toomas, the cowherd, with a few questions, spoken in a confidential tone. He has nothing to fear from Toomas. There is nothing in Toomas that might tax the unsound valve of his heart. For this shabby, bleary-eyed little man looks up at his lord and master as if God Almighty from the clouds above were standing before him. And only when von Kremer has turned to go, does the cowherd remember to doff his cap. He has no complaint, he asks for nothing.

When the Squire has taken a look round his dairy-farm, a collective name for the threshing-shed, stone-walled haymow and a couple of peat-sheds taken together, which by the way, are comparatively new and decent-looking buildings and do not offend the eye. When he has looked for wild strawberries on the hillside, just to pass the time, and teased a hedgehog in a bush or poked his stick at a harmless grass-snake or lizard, he turns his steps homeward across the village green. And so he finally arrives at the manor-house with a hearty appetite which does not pick and choose between the best and the worst that the cook sets before him. A glass of cheap port wine quenches his thirst and sends him to a well-earned farmer's nap, lasting an hour or two.

In the late afternoon Herr von Kremer takes another walk over his estate, only this time he makes a shorter round. And then comes the most interesting item in the day's programme: watching the dairy-maids milk the cows in the cattle-yard. The nimble hands tugging at the teats, the steady stream of milk, the frothing buckets — all this is such a bracing spectacle that he goes home in high spirits to wind up his old music-box, whose mild notes at once put him in the right mood to enjoy his evening meal. Sometimes, while eating, he accompanies the melody with snatches of song which, according to Mistress Reemet's critical remarks, sound

"like the teeth of ten hacksaws tearing at the wall or the rattle of rolling pebbles".

By the light of three candles — he still has no use for kerosene — the Knight von Kremer yawns as he reads a few columns from "Revalsche Zeitung", and a couple of verses from the Book of Books, mostly devoted to the wisdom of Solomon; for he keeps nothing else in the house in the way of literature. The candles go out at last, and so ends one more day in the old bachelor's life — a day exactly like the one before it and like the endless row of its predecessors.

CHAPTER TWO

One spring, at the beginning of the eighteen nineties, a bright streak of colour suddenly crossed the habitually calm grey tones of his life. All at once he began to feel that he was no longer alone with himself. It seemed to him that an intangible presence, strange and hitherto unknown, imbued everything he saw and heard and smelled, even the air that he breathed. At first he couldn't define it as being beautiful or ugly, good or evil, but it was singularly novel and unbelievably precious. Then the vagueness clarified and turned to honey of a sweetness that bordered on bitterness.

Only on rare occasions did Ulrich von Kremer choose for his daily walks the short overgrown lane which curved round the southern end of the manor-house past the barn and led down towards the cluster of Kruusimäe cottages, since this path soon lost itself in the peat-bog, where in places the water was ankle-deep. He might just as well have returned dry-footed by the foot-path which wound its way between the hill and the bog beyond the little village, so prolonging his walk, but Herr von Kremer was not fond of narrow paths. One afternoon, however, when he emerged from the clump of burgeoning hazel bushes behind the barn, where he had stopped unseen to listen to the bawling and bellowing of the ploughmen as they drove their yokes of oxen across the field, he found himself on the village green. Nibbling at a piece of white bread, he strolled on as far as the stile beyond which the road makes a sudden dip towards the bog and becomes wet and sodden, where he turned, having first thrown a glance by way of greeting in the direction of the church-steeple visible across the bog; and

going along the stake-fence, he made for the clump of alders which marked the beginning of the trodden path running between meadow and field as far as the manor-house.

In the shade of these same alders squatted the last of the scattered cottars' huts which dotted the edge of the village green, its back leaning against a gravel mound, so that, seen from the manor-house, only the crest of its roof was visible. To Herr von Kremer, standing at his bedroom window, it always looked like a big black hairy caterpillar crawling along the edge of the field. And this sight invariably brought to his mind Tõnu Prillup himself, the tenant of the cottage, who was as hairy as a caterpillar and by whose surname the cottage was called.

As the walker was passing Prillup's yard, on which the full spring sun was smiling brightly, a flitting glimpse of something colourful caught his eye, making him turn his head and slacken his pace. He made it out to be a red petticoat on the bright green grass: in the corner of the yard near the barn lay a woman in the bright spring sunshine, eyes closed and mouth open.

"How come! Sleeping on a workday!" flashed across the mind of Kremer the landlord. On a closer scrutiny he had to admit, though, that he did not know who the sleeper was. "A visitor, perhaps? Well, it's all the same to me!" And he turned to go. But he took only three steps. It suddenly struck him that here was something worth looking at again, and he turned his head. And, as he was still in doubt what that something was, he retraced those three steps and took a fourth so as to bring himself nearer to the stile. The yard and hut were lifeless, only a couple of hens were scratching under the threshing-shed gate and some sparrows were holding a noisy meeting in the tall birch that grew in the middle of the yard.

The sleeping idler, curled up snugly like a cat, had thrown her head far back, resting it on her left arm, so that her face was in profile and her white throat below her suntanned chin was in full view. Her face and smiling mouth wore a cunning expression, as if she were listening to some whispered gossip. Herr von Kremer also noticed that the sleeper's teeth were very widely spaced, and his attention was drawn in particular to two soft furrows on the full youthful throat just above the string of cheap glass beads. And now he suddenly realized that it was just the memory of those little furrows that had aroused his innocent curiosity in the first

place and made him turn back. In all other respects this young woman was just like the other young wives of the village, the bright silver wedding-ring on the finger of her right hand bearing testimony that she was a wife and not a maiden.

Should he inquire who she was? Kremer knew all the grown-up inhabitants of his small parish, the cottars' families in particular, right down to the little tots. And now, in Prillup's yard was a woman, to all appearances feeling very much at home, whom he did not recognize. Well, why not ask? But Herr von Kremer turned to go, as if he were loath to awaken the sleeper, and the question would have remained unasked had Prillup's cottage not been adorned with a brand new door.

He stopped, after taking a couple of steps, to have a better look at this bit of luxury. Resting his foot on the lower crossbar of the stile, he leaned on his juniper stick, which he held as a prop under the small of his back, and looked at the dingy little hut more critically, taking in the cabbage patch and the strip of plough-land, and found ... hm-m, that Tõnu's household should be listed among the more prosperous of the small tenants of Mäeküla. But who was that on the grass over there? And he stole another glance at the sleeper. Then he began to wonder where Tõnu's wife Leenu was. And what about their two or three children? The tiny window revealed no sign of life within. Perhaps this was someone who had come to help them out? The red petticoat on the grass beside the barn tempted him to turn his eyes once more in that direction. Finally his gaze rested on some wooden tubs and bowls beside the fence, which evidently awaited scrubbing and scalding, but the fire under the big iron cauldron had died out. He would indeed have gone on his way if just then two children laughing boisterously had not come running full tilt from the lower meadow towards the cottage, which made him stop once more.

"Mari! Look, Mari! See what we've got!" The boy was in front with a tiny wren's nest in his hand, the girl at his heels with hair flying, and leaping round them in circles was the hairy mass of a dog wild with excitement. Like a veritable whirlwind they rushed to the fence, just where the sleeper lay on the other side. No one noticed the lord of the manor, standing by the stile.

Watching her as she woke up and began to rise, Kremer concluded that she must be quite young. In all the slow, unhurried movements of this

young woman called Mari — the way she raised her head, turned over on her knees and slowly got to her feet — there was something oddly at variance with the physical maturity of her figure, and the same was true for the expression on her face as she approached the bird's nest and the tone of her voice as she explained to the little thief in a serious and authoritative way that he must take the nest back at once, otherwise all the birds would fly away and never come back to Prillup's.

"But the eggs?"

"Together with the eggs, of course."

"But why? They are so nice and speckled! One or two . . ."

"No, no, not a single one. The mother bird keeps count."

But the expression on the scolder's face belied her words as she looked curiously at the tiny egg in the palm of her hand, and showed that deep down her sympathies were on the side of the boy.

At that instant all three noticed the landlord, at whom the dog began to bark, and the discussion ceased abruptly.

"Are you from this family?" asked Kremer, stepping nearer and speaking in good Estonian, even using the broad patois of the peasants.

The woman looked at him calmly, but made no answer. Kremer waited. "Well, why don't you speak?"

The young woman looked him over from the peak of his cap to the tips of his toes without once opening her mouth. Tenderly she put the wren's egg back in the nest.

"She's far from foolish," thought Kremer, flushing a little under her sharp scrutiny. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, trying to think of another approach, but on second thought he addressed the children instead.

"Does this Mari live with you?"

The three stood before him, the children with their backs to the fence, the woman with her stomach pressed against it. Hearing the question, the children quickly glanced up at the woman, and as she remained silent with a faint smile lurking on her lips, they, too, kept their own counsel and only giggled. The wet patch under each little nose glistened in harmony with their bubbling mirth.

"Blockheads!" mumbled Herr von Kremer, but only after he had turned his back on them.

When he had gone some twenty paces, he might have got an exhaustive explanation concerning this mysterious Mari, if his curiosity had lasted that long. The ploughmen had by this time left the hazel bushes far behind and were now ploughing the field on the slope near Kruusimäe, across which Kremer was wending his way homeward, and among the ploughmen was Tõnu Prillup. He was just turning his plough near the edge of the field when the landlord caught up with him, after the other ploughmen had already moved further up the slope. But Kremer answered Prillup's greeting without stopping him; something he himself could hardly have explained prevented him from asking the question. Soon the dull echo of Prillup's voice resounded from afar as he called the oxen by name, urging them on, shouting to them to keep to the forrow. And the slope above him rang with the same loud chorus, accompanied by the lash of whips and some hearty manly swearing.

To the music of this wholesome ploughmen's pastoral the lord of Mäeküla Manor marched on, arriving home a little tired and dissatisfied with himself for some mysterious reason. That evening the steward came in with some report or other, and when business was over, Kremer was on the point of dropping a hint about the woman in Prillup's yard. But again it did not seem worthwhile, and by his silence he gave Reemet to understand that he was dismissed.

He was in bed when he suddenly remembered, among other things, that Tõnu Prillup was one of the cottars who had failed to pay all his rent on St. George's Day. But such things happened so often at Mäeküla Manor that he usually paid little heed to the reasons that were proffered. But wait — was it not Prillup who had mumbled something about a funeral — his wife's funeral? So this young... But it was barely three weeks since St. George's Day, and Prillup had not breathed a word about the expenses of a wedding. Or was it Rein Kiilaste who had spoken of his wife's death, and Tõnu had mumbled something about a wedding, and not a funeral? During the autumn and long winter months Leenu had perhaps... But... and Herr von Kremer pulled the blanket over his ears — it was none of his business, after all.

Nevertheless, before falling asleep he hazily recalled that Prillup's children had called her Mari. And last of all, when his eyes were closing in sleep and his mouth was dropping open for a snore, he

thought, with a sneer: "What absurd-looking ashblond hair — all matted. Bah!"

When Kremer laid his hand on the gate the next morning, he hesitated, wondering. "Well, where to? To the dairy again? Hm, I might as well go to Kruusimäe and see how far the men have got with the ploughing this morning." And he steered his course in the direction of Kruusimäe hamlet. On the way he inspected the ploughing with proprietory solicitude, and then took the same footpath past the cottages that he had trodden the day before. Happening to look into Prillup's yard, he saw only the two little "blockheads" there. They were sitting on a millstone near the high doorsill of the barn, trimming the hair on the dog's back with a huge pair of shears. They were so preoccupied with their job, one holding the dog, the other working the shears, that neither had eyes for the passer-by. Through the open window of the cottage came the click-clack of a handloom, but the window was too small to reveal who was plying the shuttle.

So rare and clear was the air that morning that even at a considerable distance the regular click-clacking of the loom still reached Kremer's ears; and he seemed to hear it still when he was back in his own house. He went to his bedroom, opened the window and stood there listening as he gazed beyond the haymow, over to where the big black caterpillar sprawled on the edge of the field.

The next two days a cold rain poured down and the old gentelman was forced to stay indoors. Most of the first day was spent lolling about the house and yawning, on the second, however, he began to complain, even to swear, which was most unusual for him. The third day dawned misty, the sky was overcast and it drizzled from time to time, spattering a few drops of rain. But all this failed to daunt the impatient old man in spite of the stinging pain in his right hip and left ankle. Consequently, having donned a pair of high galoshes and a raincoat, he turned his steps towards the gate. From there without a moment's hesitation he made straight for the dairy, not once slackening speed — which all goes to prove that there is a method to the madness of rainy days too.

"Phew!" said the cook and house-maid *Fillemine Fahtrik**, Kremer's

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* For *Vilhelmine Vahtrik,* an Estonian name pronounced with an exaggerated German accent.

only maid-servant, who proudly called herself the housekeeper of Mäeküla Manor, when her master returned after an hour or so. "The master's back already and Mari hasn't finished the windows yet! I told her to be quick. But they are all so slow here, so *ferry slow*."*

Herr von Kremer's answer was a scarcely audible murmur as he allowed his raincoat and overshoes to be removed, which in the hands of Miss Fillemine was slow work, because of the many layers and rolls of fat that hindered her movements. "Which Mari?" he thought to himself, for usually the windows were cleaned and the floors scrubbed by Kai, the cowherd's wife. But he said nothing and stepped into the nearest room, the door of which Fillemine had opened for him. Evidently house-cleaning had been finished in this room already.

Here he sat and rested a few minutes, then took several aimless turns about the room, and finally, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, he stopped to examine each window-pane in turn, as if testing their transparency.

No sound was heard from the adjacent room, his study. Perhaps that was finished too? He turned the handle of the door and looked in: yes, it was. On this side of the house there were no more rooms, the other two of his four rooms were on the other side of the small front hall.

"Which Mari?" — He turned and opened the door into the front hall and listened. Fillemine was rattling dishes in the kitchen — no other sound. Thereupon he stepped into the front hall and opened the door opposite — but only a crack. Yes, there was someone in the drawing-room, and that someone was whistling.

When the old gentleman made his appearance in the drawing-room — and why should he not go and see who was cleaning his windows in place of Kai? — he at once recognized the woman he had spied idling in Prillup's yard even before he saw her head and neck, which were hidden behind the transom, and even though she was wearing clothes of a different colour. Her graceful bearing, her nimble movements as she sat on the window-sill rubbing the window-pane with one hand, were something he had unconsciously carried in his memory, all closely associated with the bright green grass in Prillup's yard.

Apparently Mari had not heard him come in, for she went on whistling

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* For *very slow*.

to herself, not very shrilly but with a sureness that comes from long practice. He hesitated, his long greystreaked whiskers drooping a little, before he made his presence known by stepping a little nearer.

"Well, well," he began, clasping his hands on the small of his back, "it looks like I've got a new window-cleaner. Where does she come from?"

The young woman slowly pulled her head inside, and took her time before answering. That she really intended to make an answer this time was evident, judging from the expression on her face. But her eyes were gazing slantwise and from the far-away look in her eyes he could see that she was wool-gathering. She made an effort to concentrate her attention on Kremer's question and then said abruptly. "Good morning! The cowherd's wife's in childbed."

"Is that so? Why yes... of course... that was to be expected. And where do you come from?"

"From Prillup's of course."

"From Prillup's — well, well!" Von Kremer was bent on making a joke. "So Prillup has two wives now?"

"No — only one. My sister died four weeks ago."

"Was Prillup's Leenu your sister, then?"

Mari nodded. Still sitting on the window-sill, she shifted her position and set to work again, vigourously rubbing the other side of the window-pane with the wet cloth.

"Buried one wife and married another — all within four weeks."

"What else could he do?"

"Where did he bring you from?"

"From the Forest."

The answer was not meant as a joke, nor did Kremer take it as such, for a large parish abounding in forests, which lay south-west of Särgvere, beyond the church, was locally known by this name.

"Well, well! Yes, I remember, Leenu was not from these parts. Your wedding was soon after St. George's Day, I believe?"

"On St. Nicholas' Day", said the young woman, and with the back of her left hand she deftly wiped her nose.

"But Tõnu's children don't call you mother?"

"I'm no mother to them." Saying this she stepped down from the window-sill and dipped her cloth into the pail. Her tangled hair, the colour of

peat-ash, had strayed from under her kerchief, which had slipped back, and when she lifted her head, the second little furrow on her throat was in full view, just above the knot of the kerchief.

The baron considered that the conversation had lasted long enough and moved towards the door, as if he had only stopped here to talk for a moment on his way to the next room where some urgent business awaited him. But when he came back and crossed the drawing-room, he stopped once more with his hand on the door knob.

"Listen, Mari, when I asked you a few days ago who you were — why didn't you answer me?"

"Didn't want to."

"You didn't want to?!" His Bismarckian eyebrows rose a little. "Well — but why?"

"Simply didn't want to," said Mari and carried her pail and cloth to the next window.

Herr von Kremer took a step back from the door as if he intended to follow up the argument, but after second thoughts he smacked his lips several times and changed the subject abruptly. "Is he kind to you?"

"Who?"

"Prillup, of course."

The young woman carried the step-ladder to the next window, where she was going to begin washing the upper panes, and climbed up. From there she answered him, and to Kremer it seemed that again a far-away look had come to her eyes.

"Who's he been unkind to?"

Mari went on with her work and the master of the house still lingered near. Letting his gaze slide over her figure, travelling upwards from her raw-hide sandals to her bare arms, and up to her head, which nearly touched the ceiling, he said in that nauseating tone of a man without a sense of humour, who is trying to be humorous:

"What if you should fall down and break your neck?"

To which the woman reacted in a most unexpected way. The face which she now turned towards the old knight standing below had suddenly changed its mask. It wore an expression of bitterness for the first time and her widely-spaced teeth flashed white between her lips.

"Who'd be sorry, I wonder? The baron perhaps?"

Kremer gave a flat little laugh and left the room. He was happy, but what made him happy he did not even try to probe. Going from the dining-room to the study and back again, he kept tugging at his long tusk-like whiskers. In the dining-room he walked round and round the big table, his thumbs stuck into the armholes of his waistcoat, wriggling his fingers. And then he found himself standing at one of the windows where a faint footmark on the sill caught his eye. This gave him an excuse to scrutinize the window-sills more closely, which he did with no ill-will, and this induced him to carry his inspection further to the window-panes. And when he had examined their transparency at close range, he found that their cleanliness was not up to the mark, whereas her predecessor's work in that respect had nearly always been faultless. But she'll learn, thought the benevolent master amiably, and went on to inspect the windows in the study.

A little later it occurred to Kremer that there was something he had forgotten to ask Mari — something that he as master was entitled to know. So he went back and asked her if she was also taking Kai's place at the milking, as he himself had not been to the dairy for a day or two. Her answer was in the affirmative. Then he wanted to know who had sent for her — the steward or his wife. Word had come from the manor-house, Mari told him, but who from — she had no idea.

After that he asked her if she had ever cleaned the windows of a manor-house before. No, this was the first time. And had Prillup, by any chance, made that new door to his cottage on the occasion of the wedding?

The baron had some more important questions that wanted answering, but they had somehow slipped his memory. So he let it go at that for the present and was about to turn away when he suddenly remembered something.

"Have you any more sisters at home?"

"Two."

"Younger than you?"

"One is younger, the other is older."

"Well, how did it happen that he chose you from between them?"

"Liina hasn't been to confirmation yet, and Tiina — didn't want to marry him."

"And you did?"

"One of us had to — he has Leenu's children."

"Well, well!" mumbled the baron, curt and business-like.

When Ulrich von Kremer was back again in the other wing of the house, he stared for a long time at a big inkstain on the faded green broadcloth covering his writing-desk, rubbing his temples with his knuckles. He gave way to his feelings as he pondered the fact that there were absurdities which even two days of rain could not wash away if a man is burdened with "plebeian inclinations". And his gaze slowly rose from the blot on the desk to a smallish dim portrait in oil which hung beside its companion on the shadowy wall. Those were the exact words that, with maternal anxiety, had once escaped from the aristocratically haughty lips of that honourable lady.

Half an hour later Herr von Kremer was sitting at his dinner-table and the maidenly Vilhelmine was ministering to his wants. Suddenly she stopped, listening, and her hair visibly stood on end while her lips whispered the word "Jesus!". Then she bustled out of the room, to roll back shortly with the tinkling music-box in her hand, like a lamb she had rescued from a wolf's fangs.

"They are so coarse, so ferry coarse! I saw that at once when she first set foot in the house — that she is a coarse creature. Can the master guess what she did? She sat right down on the sofa, stretched out her legs and said, 'Oh boy, how nice it would be to relax here!' I n m y presence, u n d e r m y eyes, she sits down on the sofa and says, 'Oh boy, how nice it would be to relax here!'"

While the unhappy housekeeper goes and puts the desecrated tinkler on a small table in the corner, her employer goes on slowly chewing his food, swallows a mouthful, and only then says:

"Yes, they are rather foolish, those peasants. They need training."

That same evening in the cow-shed, when the lord of the manor got to talking with the steward's wife, who was supervising the milking, he said quite casually: "We've got a new woman to help with the milking, I see."

"Yes, I got her to come and help. She seemed a little cleaner than the others."

"She has washed my windows nice and clean, better than Kai. In future you can let her come and do all the cleaning and scrubbing." And then he changed the subject and began to talk about the calves.

CHAPTER THREE

Dry weather follows the rainy days, and the lord of the Manor again goes to the dairy regularly at milking-time, sometimes even twice a day. Usually he makes his appearance early so as to look on while the cows are watered down at the well before milking. How they rush headlong towards the water-trough, all jammed together, blocking each other's way, pushing, jostling, butting with their horns! How merrily the water cascades over their necks, how their tails swish and lash, how their nostrils blow, and how their bells clank! All this rush and noise is a drama, a live performance to Kremer that he would never dream of exchanging for anything staged at the theatre in town, where he goes half-heartedly a couple of times every winter. Nor would he exchange the bellowing of his bull for the best orchestra music. In due time the beasts are standing about in the spacious cattle-yard, dreamily chewing the cud, and a white wooden bucket and ten releasing fingers appear under the udder of one cow, then another, and the lord of the Manor strolls among them, striking out at the pestering flies with his stick, breathing deeply the air that is saturated with the sweet aroma of warm milk mixed with odours exhaled by the animals. Finally, he makes a longer stop near the big tub where Mistress Reemet is sitting on a low stool, keeping an eye on the milkers while her knitting needles click in her hands, always willing to give comprehensive answers to the master's questions. And while they talk, the milkers come along — Tiiu and Truutu, then Madli, and then an elderly woman and a younger one — each empties her milk-bucket into the deep frothy hollow of the strainer lined with cheese-cloth. One of the milkers is new, and the baron

looks sharply at her hands and follows her retreating figure with an appraising glance.

The women do not take much notice of him, however. Evidently he is not one of those gentry whose presence engenders fear. And the new hired woman seems to be in the know already, the one from Prillup's cottage, for one of the dairymaids laughingly tells the others how Mari had sent a squirt of milk from the cow's teat after the old man one day when he was passing, leaving a long row of milk drops, like white buttons, glistening on the tail of his coat. He had looked back over his shoulder when he heard the spurts of laughter, but had continued on his way without a word. In this respect cowherd Toomas is the only exception among the farmhands on Kremer's estate: he lives in constant fear of the baron, and no wonder — his wife is in childbed with her fifth.

While the milk-buckets are frothing and the tub is filling, and Mistress Kuru appears on her way to the milk-house, pulling a hand-cart piled high with clean wooden vessels from the scullery, with her daughter pushing behind — a man comes into view between the hillocks on the grazing-moor — a man whom everyone recognizes from afar, no matter how poor his eyesight. An invisible hand seems to have taken hold of the man's nose, moving it up and down, left and right, to a regular beat. From a distance it looks as if his neck had worn so thin that the nodding head on it might at any moment come off and fall down with a thud.

This man enters the servants' quarters, which is under the same roof as the milk-house, and if the full tub has not been brought in yet, he sometimes comes to the cattle-yard to watch the end of the milking. This is always a sign for the baron to depart. Not that he dislikes this man — he's useful in many ways — but there's something in his salutation that Kremer would rather not face. Nine or ten years ago, when the invisible hand had not yet taken hold of Yaan Kuru's nose, Baron Kremer had sometimes been glad to have a private talk with him. At that time the tone of Yaan's greeting had been less affected and the expression in his eyes had been more sincere.

"I can't make out where that man sinks his money!" begins Yaan when he has passed the time of day with Mistress Reemet. "He's for ever demanding money in advance — can't even wait till the end of the month. Why, at other estates, elsewhere — goodness me . . ."

Mistress Reemet has so often heard Yaan's stories, which begin with money and end with money, that she thanks her lucky stars when the tubful of milk is carried into the milkhouse. Here she only has to lower the measuring-stick into the milk and write the amount on the slate. Her job done, she leaves at once.

One day follows another, and Herr von Kremer always arrives punctually at milking time, and among the older women he sees the new milker, Kai's substitute, who washed his windows so nice and clean. But one noon he finds another woman milking the cows in her place. It is Yuula Pajus, Mari's next door neighbour.

"Well, what's the matter with Mari?"

"Her fingers are sore. She asked me to take her place today."

"Sore fingers? What a fine lady — with lily white hands!"

Out walking that afternoon, Herr von Kremer, lost in thought, finds himself on Kruusimäe, although he had intended to go to the dairy. On the green near Prillup's gate a game of skittles is in full swing. The players are Tõnu's two children and their new mother. All three are deeply engrossed in the game, especially the mother. With great precision she measures the distance with her eye when her turn comes round, then with a mighty swing she lets the club fly. And if she hits the mark and one or more skittles jump out of the square, she says proudly: "That's the way!" They do not see the lord of the Manor standing there — they would not have noticed him anyway, even if he had not been screened by the alder bush.

Nor does he interrupt their game. It pleases him to watch the contest, although he himself has never been a sportsman. And when the game comes to an end, he slowly retraces his steps homeward, his eyes filmy, his mouth wreathed in a youthful smile.

The next day Prillup's wife Mari is again at the milking, working silently and seriously as always. Whenever she goes to empty her bucket, her eyes look askance, seemingly and old habit of hers, and then she turns her head with a jerk as if to shake off the trance. But the next moment Kremer may see her widely-spaced teeth flash in laughter because the cow Kiryak has kicked the milk-bucket over. And a few more milking-times go by, noon and evening, until one day Herr von Kremer discerns among the milkers a thin sallow-faced woman whose hands and feet move too quickly, as if she were trying hard to make up for something.

After that day von Kremer's visits to the dairy at milking-time became fewer and far between. The grass and the grain were growing fast, the fields and the meadow attracted him more and more. He frequently took longer walks now, going farther afield, even to the bog and the marshy meadow, even as far as the pitch-black stream. However, he soon realized that these long walks were wasted, for his eyes took in very little of the scene around him. A curtain seemed to veil everything, and when he tore it asunder for a moment, it immediately closed again. Whatever he gazed at seemed to float in dim outline, a blurred image behind the curtain. Once he caught himself staring at a juniper for an hour or more — as if he were making a long speech to it — without himself being aware of the cause and purpose of his action, for this was not conscious thinking. And when he got home, mentally exhausted with a secret restlessness burning in his bosom, he always had an uneasy feeling that something was left undone. He fought against the temptation to turn back there and then, to go and tie together the loose ends. From all those hazy wanderings he remembered at times only some trifling incident, and it would recur over and over again: as when he had gazed long at his own reflection in the pitch-black water of the stream and mumbled to himself louder and louder: "Ulrich! Ulrich!"

Then came the hot sultry days and the long twilight hours of midsummer, the sky was high, the air hummed with insects; pungent odours from the overgrown orchard were wafted up the hill, and everything seemed to shimmer and melt in the heat waves. From dusk to midnight high up in the bluish sky the silvery crescent of the moon floated over the meadow, and the ripples on the surface of the pitch-black stream below glimmered white in the moonlight. The birch-grove behind the cabbage patch was breathlessly still — a nightingale was singing — while the spectral buildings on the crest of the hill resembled huge meditating heads with mysterious bats, like troubled thoughts, flying round them.

On such evenings Ulrich would lean out of the open window, looking and listening, smelling the odours of night, and he was wistful and sad. His bald head reflected the pale moonlight and attracted moths, so that he instinctively raised his hand to shield his head. Though he had returned from Särgvere only two days before, he was already suffering from loneliness and a feeling of sorrow and self-pity was slowly and silently filling his heart and soul.

Evening after evening came and went. Thinking back he saw more and more clearly the long and narrow road that came so straight from a distant moor and ended at his feet. Along the edge of this road there were no landmarks that might have awakened memories — some action good or bad, some event fortunate or unfortunate, some enjoyment lawful or prohibited. And when he turned and looked over the pale lilac-coloured plain that lay ahead, where a herd of brindle cows represented the only living thing in his life, then with a shudder he saw the black hearse inexorably drawing nearer, and it wasn't too far away. He passed his hand over his bald head, as if to wipe away the cold sweat, closed the window and crept into bed without even opening the Bible. But sleep would not come. And the nightingale mocked him from the birch-grove, even though the window was tightly closed.

All through the night he tormented himself with self-reproach. He himself was to blame for everything. Circumstances had hindered him, but they should not have prevented him from taking the step. He had been attracted by the fair sex, and there had been opportunities, but he had let them slip by. He had kept putting off for another time, a better time — which never came. He had hesitated where he should have acted with resolution; he had refused where he should have accepted. Always the same old story — there's still time, plenty of time. And so he had only been an onlooker, his mouth watering, while others had tasted, because they were wiser than he.

Wiser? Did it depend on wisdom? There's no denying that hitherto his attitude towards women had not been quite right or, perhaps, liberal enough. They attracted him and repelled him at the same time. He tolerated them only in a certain "neutral zone", they were attractive to him only on the other side of the barrier. But when he thought of them as standing on the near side, abject fear filled his heart, as if he were facing some danger which lurked behind such intimacy. He imagined that in every fold of her dress, in every curl of her hair and feather on her hat, something dreadful lay in wait for him. But was it not true that he had begun to build this very house with some such intention at the back of his mind, when he no longer desired to let the estate to strangers? Surely there was someone who would have been satisfied with the little he had to offer, or who might have added to what he had. But hardly had he made a mental choice, when a warning hand would pull him back. This lack of resolution on his part soon

became general knowledge and he was treated accordingly. Some women referred to him as "only Ulrich", to others he was merely a comic figure, and for many he did not exist at all. Of course, such a state of affairs could not long remain unnoticed by him; and he at once withdrew into himself, crept into a shell. And now on these hot summer nights he was reliving the past, trying to make the most of some meagre recollections from his youth, when he had taken part in a few nightly drinking bouts in town in March or September, and indulged in some folly with young men of his own age, which he had always later sincerely regretted.

Was this an inborn trait — this fear of being trapped into matrimony? Who knows? Thinking back, he remembered little Friede through the mists of time. To this day he believed that he would have taken his mother's little seamstress into the family circle, quite legally, of course, if only conditions had been the least bit favourable! If only the fatal word had not passed those determined lips: "Yes, Ulrich, why not? And begin at once to learn the trade of a shoemaker before it is too late, since it suits your interest and inclinations." And had not little Friede herself written to him: "Yes, Ulrich, but you know that I am paid very little for my work..." And he had been obliged to break all connections with her, nor could he keep up a clandestine affair because she deemed it best to become the wife of a shoemaker who had already learnt his trade.

Did this really go to prove the psychological hypothesis maintained by the late widow von Kremer, née Countess Lützen, that her son was more at home among members of the lower orders than among the upper classes — at least in his love affairs? Ulrich had to admit that there was a grain of truth in his mother's surmise, that the squalid but sturdy world of the common people with whom he came in contact day by day, somehow suited him better, perhaps it stimulated him just because of its wholesome earthiness. But was his case such an uncommon exception? Were there so many knights in olden days, then, who had not taken advantage of their knightly privilege concerning virgin brides of lower birth? Evidently there had been grounds for granting them such a right. Moreover, when their nearest neighbour at Särgvere, honest old Radeck of Suurpalu, went to town, it could very well happen that a buxom housewife from a wayside farmhouse would run out, stop the coach and say, "Be a good fellow and bring me three pounds of black wool from Karu's shop?" And as to brother

Heinrich — well, people sneered — but that ugly business had nothing to do with Ulrich.

Anyhow, the black hearse was coming, coming, and it was high time that he should, in some degree at least, right the wrong that he had inflicted upon himself through all these years. And night after night, Ulrich turned it over and over in his mind, tossing restlessly in his bed. Now and again he would take a piece of bread and put it in his mouth, and there was also a little box of sour fruit-drops on the night-table. Whenever the pillow under his head got too hot, which happened every ten minutes, he turned it over. And with his feet he would raise and lower the blanket, trying to make a draught to cool himself.

Through the ceiling he could hear the mice squeaking and the rats gnawing. What a life they had up there on the soft sandy floors of eight big empty rooms, where the windows were boarded up and an aristocratic twilight reigned, even in the daytime — a delightful unhampered life that they shared with the steward's chickens who roosted there at night on make-shift perches. And while Ulrich nibbled at his bread and sucked his fruit-drops and turned his pillow over, all the time plotting an important turning-point in his life, the cock announced to him from the upper storey at two-hour intervals, and the cuckoo from the adjacent room reminded him every half hour, that the distance between him and the black hearse had shrunk once more. The cuckoo sat in Reemet's Schwartzwald clock and Ulrich heard its voice distinctly, since the stone-flagged passage that divided the house lengthwise and separated the master's apartments from the servant's living quarters, where lived the steward and the housemaid, had excellent acoustic qualities, so good that the nightly screams of the maidenly Vilhelmine were heard on the other side of the house, for the poor thing suffered from vivid nightmares on hot summer nights.

Ulrich fell asleep only after the cock's third crowing, when day had kissed the pale cheeks of dawn and made them blush, and the early sunbeams were chasing the moths that lived in the stuffing of the faded old furniture in the drawing-room.

Herr von Kremer's thoughts were so completely absorbed by this great crisis in his life that he lost count of the days of the week, and even forgot to go to Särgvere one Saturday, thinking it was a Friday. And as usual on that day, pending the absence of the master, a thorough house-cleaning

had been undertaken. And so it happened that on this Saturday the cleaning woman arrived before Vilhelmine had even been ordered to have the horses harnessed.

"No, no," von Kremer lied to his servant, "I didn't intend to go to Särgvere today, I'm going to town by the evening train. But let Mari go on with the cleaning, it won't inconvenience me in the least. I can go out for a walk when she begins the last room, in case the floor of the first one isn't dry by that time."

So Prillup's young wife began her cleaning in the bedroom, while in the study the old gentleman put on his spectacles and concentrated all his attention on the columns of figures in a big ledger.

Two large rooms separated them, so there could be no question of one disturbing the other.

And indeed, Herr von Kremer worked on unperturbed for some time; but then he suddenly stood up, took off his spectacles and went to Mari with a determined air.

Mari was down on her knees, moving the wet cloth back and forth rhythmically on the simple principle: Why hurry? Why worry? We live on God's time and on the baron's bread. But she wasn't whistling this time, she was chewing a piece of string, the end of which dangled down over her chin. The open door was within her range of vision and she must have seen him coming from the other room, but she did not raise her head or open her mouth for a greeting, lest her plaything might fall out. She wore no kerchief on her head, her arms, neck and throat were bare, her breast was half revealed. Beads of perspiration glistened on her white and sun-tanned skin, and the firm shapely calves of her legs showed from under her tucked up petticoat.

Approaching Mari, he suddenly forgot the words he had intended to say to her. On the spur of an impulse his hand suddenly darted forward and playfully touched her throat. It flashed across his mind that his fingers had brushed those two coveted little furrows on her neck, while his thumb came in contact with the warm softness of the fold under her chin, and a strangely fresh, wonderfully youthful and intoxicating odour of sweat went to his head. But all this did not affect him half as much when he jerked his hand back and stood by sheepishly as did her reaction to his boldness: with a quick turn of her head she flashed a smile at him and uttered a gay

little "ouch!" As the blood rushed to his head, roaring in his ears and blurring his sight, the problem was miraculously solved for him — he suddenly knew what he had so eagerly desired, what he had come to investigate; but now, accepting it, his knees went weak with fright and his heart gave him the signal to flee.

And so he did, going round the scrubber, slip-slopping over the wet floor, back the way he had come, without either of them having spoken a word. The skirts of his coat billowed out queerly as if they concealed a trophy that he was eager to deposit in a safe place.

After this episode he sat absolutely silent for a full quarter of an hour in the dining-room, with his hands clasped around his knee; shy, secret mirth lurking in the wrinkles around his eyes and around the corners of his mouth, while a sweet drowsiness crept into his limbs. Finally a thought began to recur in his vacant mind: next time — a little more, next time — a bit better! Another quarter of an hour passed before he remembered the tin box of fruit-drops on his night-table. Why, he might have taken one and held it to her mouth, as he would to a puppy. She would have laughed and caught it with her lips. He was sorry he had not thought of that earlier.

Well, the fruit-drops were there, and Mari was still in the house —?

No, not now. Better next time. He did not want to change anything, to spoil the sweetness of the present moment.

So he stopped dreaming and returned to reality. Tenderly he began to examine the palm and thumb of his right hand. What a pleasure to sit and look at the palm of your own hand, whose skin still had that warm tickling feeling as if soft down had brushed it! And suddenly the sweet heady odour of perspiration was in his nostrils. Closing his eyes, he rested his head against the back of the chair. Drops of pure happiness seemed to trickle down from the ends of his long whiskers.

Then, quite suddenly, he was obsessed by the need of exercise. He felt that he must carry his trophy somewhere far away, where he could admire it in new surroundings. Vilhelmine appeared in answer to his impatient bell, wiping her hands on the corner of her apron.

"Let the horses be harnessed!"

"Already? The master intended to go to the railway station in the evening."

"No, I'm going to Särgvere right away."

Somehow "Särgvere" had an evil sound in Ulrich's ears today, like the crackle of splintered glass. And simultaneously he was reminded of the Three Penguins, the nickname his sisters had been given by brother Heinrich, and at the thought a shadow of annoyance, even dread, darkened his brow. Vilhelmine was still on the threshold when he changed his mind again, saying that he was going to town after all. And why go by rail? The horses would take him there — it was barely thirty versts. And in the coach he would be alone, all alone with himself, thinking and planning as he rolled along in comfort.

But his best suit was in the wardrobe, and the wardrobe was in the bedroom —? Of course, she would leave the room. But no, not today, no more seeing her again today.

So Vilhelmine was told to bring the suit to the study, where he changed, although his dressing-room was clean and the floor dry by that time.

When the owner of Mäeküla estate in his dust-coat and black felt hat, attended by his servant Vilhelmine, stepped into the open coach, the apron of which she solemnly hooked up, as if she were conferring an honour on herself, he caught sight of someone standing at the middle window of the drawing-room with her nose pressed flat against the pane. Though he caught only a fleeting glimpse, he saw that her pouting lips were sucking something.

Good — she had found the box of fruit-drops herself, he was happy to think. He regarded this as something very important, that it brought them closer together, that it was somehow confidential and intimate. Moreover, to Ulrich it seemed as if he himself had dropped the first sweet into her laughing mouth, had let her take it as he would have let a lap-dog snap up a lump of sugar.

When the coach drove past the windows, rounding the corner of the house, the sole passenger in it gazed happily at the coachman's back, as if a comic picture were screened on Peeter's faded thread-bare coat with bulky gathers at the waist. He did not notice that the cowherd's grimy children opened the gate for him, after standing there waiting for some time already; nor did he answer the greetings of the people who were having their horses shod at the smithy. The coach had driven a verst or more along the road to Särgvere before he noticed that something was amiss.

"Stop, Peeter! I'm going to town!"

Peeter let the horses trot on a while before he drew the reins and hollered "Whoa!" Some more time passed before his narrow beardless boyish face on its long thin neck turned sideways towards the master.

"Ah — to town is it —?"

"Yes, to town. I'm going to town."

"Not to the railway station?"

"No, drive straight to town. I'm not going by train."

"So — not by train?" And Peeter's loose jaw dropped still lower while his smallish head, deep in his out-sized driver's hat, turned back slowly. He looked long and tenderly at the backs of the horses — they were a good team of plough-horses, properly speaking not for the coach at all — and then he said rather abruptly:

"But we haven't taken no oats along."

"You can buy some oats on the way, or when we get to town."

Only then did Peeter begin to turn the horses, but again he hesitated.

"I ain't got no bread with me, and no money."

"I'll give you some money, don't worry."

"Me — some money?"

"Well, yes — you won't have to stay the night in town. When you've rested the horses a bit, you can come back right away."

By this time they had reached the highway from where they could start on their way to town.

CHAPTER FOUR

Herr von Kremer spent a pleasant Sunday in Tallinn, went for a walk in Kadriorg Park, listened to music at the Kursaal, had supper at the Hotel du Nord — and all alone, for his brother Heinrich had gone to Särgvere, and he did not want the company of strangers. And both nights were spent in their absolutely quiet city apartment in Lai Street, which he shared with the others from Särgvere. Still he was unable to make any definite plan, as he had hoped to do when setting out from home. The trouble was that he could not come to a decision, try as he would, for every time he got his thoughts more or less straightened and sorted out, they would all scatter again like flies imprisoned in your fist if you leave a crack between your fingers.

In the end he made up his mind to go home again and continue his searching there. So on Monday he was back at Mäeküla, where he spent the evenings sitting at the open window as before. The nightingale had left the grove beyond the cabbage patch, but a cuckoo had come in its place, stimulating his thoughts with its vigorous monologues, so that he began to regard the bird as his friendly little taskmaster.

Actually he now knew exactly what he intended to do, and he was sure that he would accomplish his object. On no condition would he turn back — of that he was absolutely certain.

To begin with, he would most likely have to find a way to please her. But who are they to pick and choose — those sons and daughters of the soil — especially the cottars who live in the huts here on the edge of the

marsh, who borrow shoes and kerchiefs from one another when they go to church on Sunday. No, there was no cause for worry on that score.

Still there was something that clouded his prospects and cast a dark shadow on his target, and out of the dim twilight now and again there rose a warning finger, which even seemed to threaten at times.

At first Kremer thought that these doubts and misgivings stemmed from the teaching of the Ten Commandments, and he went on probing his motives. On that point his conscience was soon at rest, however. *Nitimur in vetitum** was about all the Latin he remembered from his school-days. Is it not human to crave forbidden fruit? If those wise old men in the Bible, which he read every evening and knew practically by heart, if even those great men of old, the chosen few before the face of God himself, were merely human and stumbled sometimes — well, what could be expected of the weak ones, such as an insignificant Ulrich von Kremer of Mäeküla — what could you expect of a worm? After all, what is the use of religion, then, and what's the good of penitence! Nobody would stumble on purpose, would he, or sin simply out of mischief! If anyone would take the trouble to glance over Ulrich von Kremer's past life and look closely at the long history of his trials, they would certainly agree that this was so. What is more, he must also admit that Ulrich von Kremer was no weaking, that he had striven and struggled like a man. But there are limits to everything in this world — there always comes a day when you feel that you have reached the end of your endurance. A human being must he humble — yes —, but he mustn't lose touch with his sheet anchor.

No, the warning finger did not point in that direction. He re-read a passage or two in the Big Book, again pondered over the moral they taught, and found every time that they confirmed his point of view. How could it be otherwise? He even found that some verses which he had formerly interpreted slightly differently, now all appeared to support his new point of view when he studied them more closely.

Still, where did that warning finger rise from?

The cuckoo began to call, and little by little Ulrich approached the solution.

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* We strive for the forbidden. *(Latin.)*

*Der Anstand! Der höhere Anstand**, for you are Ulrich von Kremer. You cannot tempt a poor cottager's wife behind her husband's back. That would be unworthy of your rank. It's done, of course, but not by such as you. How could that have slipped your memory! Why, even Radeck of Suurpalu, who cannot boast of a very high morality — even he had rather let the woman speak the truth in the end. No, Ulrich, you must conduct yourself as a man of honour — even toward a poor cottar. You must be a true man of honour. And you must act like a gentleman before, and not afterwards, as Radeck did. Well, you must simply come to an agreement with Tõnu — *jawohl!***

After a long search he had found the truth at last, and a load was lifted from his mind.

And so he would score a point over Radeck.

Yes, so it will be better — better in every way and for all concerned. She is a lively young person with a ready tongue. And who knows what may happen? Some trifle may come up, something unexpected may occur — secrets are never absolutely safe, something is always apt to leak out. And then there is that husband of hers — it is hard to tell what kind of man he is. Judging by appearances, he seems to be meek and sensible enough, but if he gets annoyed, if anger stirs his bosom? Who knows what he might do, perhaps not even he himself! And further, stones may fly in through your window — lucky if it isn't lead, and your house might be set on fire! You can never be sure of these peasants — they can never be fully trusted, their kind always have a grudge against such as we. But suppose the deal is put on a sound legal basis and all is straight in the eye of the law? Then there will be no ground for ill-feelings on either side and the shiny little revolver can lie unloaded in the drawer of his night-table.

It goes without saying that the other party must get compensation. He, too, must feel that he profits by it — he as well as she. If the interests of both sides are kept in mind, then all is fair and square and peace will be guaranteed.

But so far Kremer had no idea how that side of the deal should be settled. He took his time about it, weighing everything carefully. And again the Good defeated the Evil in his heart.

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* Decorum and the highest respectability. *(German.)*

** Just so. *(German.)*

Taking into consideration that he, the paymaster, was not a rich man, he wondered what the lowest offer should be. Well, he might let them have that little cottage and plot rent free, as Radeck was said to have done. But in Radeck's case it had been a tenant farm, while here is was only a cottager's strip of field. Or should he let them have a good-sized farm in Mäeküla village? But he had only three such farms and their leases would not expire for some time yet. Or should he give him a job at the manor? Let him take Peeter's place as coachman and groom? At a higher salary, of course. But he had no living-quarters for a married man. The two rooms in the servants' quarters were already occupied — there were several married couples, as well as single people and children there already. Even in the bath-house and laundry there was a young fellow and his widowed mother.

"Too bad I haven't got a tavern. What a pity! Nothing to worry about then. He could pay me the customary rent and get rich in no time." But that was out of the question — the tavern of the neighbouring parish was on the very border of Mäeküla and the church tavern was only a stone's throw away.

Or should it be in cash? — Cash would certainly be the simplest way out — and perhaps the best. Why not?

But no! Such an idea was rejected at once. It would look like buying a c o m m o d i t y, as one would pay for a street girl in town or at a house of ill fame. No, he could not do that, to neither of them could he offer cash. There must be other ways!

And on the whole, Ulrich, don't be eccentric, don't bargain so much! You are not rich, but neither are you poor or stingy. Give them something to make them happy — happy and grateful.

And what should that be, he wondered?

Well, hm! Why not put the farms up for sale in autumn! He had intended to do that in a few years anyway, at the request of the tenants — they were all in a poor way. Well, he could do it now, he had the right. And one farm could go as a gift to the newly weds — one of the smaller ones, perhaps. Half of the former tenants would not be in a position to pay for their farms anyway.

This plan pleased the old gentleman and he held on to it for some time, until new doubts began to haunt him. What if the agreement should

be severed? What if an end were put to it after a year or two for some reason? Such a contingency was possible — on their side or on his, — they were only human, all three of them.

But something instantly occurred to him that made his eyes go big and round and he slapped his knee with relish. He sprang to his feet.

An excellent idea! That's the only way! And the whole thing will be on a firm footing.

And in his mind's eye he saw the door open to let in that big child of a smiling girl, who would enter familiarly as if she were coming home.

That would be fair and square. And besides it would even be a noble gesture. Such an important source of income could not be entrusted to just anyone, and without the usual earnest-money, besides. For that man had none to offer. Kremer must try his luck and risk it. Of course the business required more talent and skill than you might think at first glance, and Tõnu was a simpleton — but never mind — Kremer would risk it.

And what about t h e i r side of the deal? In any case they will be satisfied, I think (and Herr von Kremer gave a queer little laugh as he glanced to left and right) — they will be satisfied, I think, when they take a look at Yaan Kuru. They ought to be grateful, too — yes, indeed — —

Thrusting his hands deep into his pockets and hunching his shoulders, he began to pace the floor from corner to corner with the animation of one who has found the truth, and the commotion raised a little breeze that played with the few stray hairs on the top of his bald head. Of course, there is no rose without a thorn — that goes without saying — and the thorns might be pretty sharp. Yaan's earnest-money, for instance, would have to be reimbursed — also the advance sum that had been received from him. The latter could be paid off little by little, and if the harvest was plentiful — well, by St. George's day the debt would be cleared off. But the earnest-money — that transaction would require expert handling. It'll not be easy, anything but easy. — — But no matter — we'll bear that sacrifice too.

In front of the mirror he paused and looked the other Kremer boldly in the eye. He felt that now they had come to an understanding. And standing there he carried on his train of thought . . .

Well, Yaan will leave, then I can let them have the Kuru farm and cottage. That would go into the bargain. That's a much-coveted morsel,

many have wanted it. And when I add a few head of cattle to my herd — — well, to put it briefly: *Der Vorhang kann aufgehen!**

He took his hat and stick and went out for a walk.

But the curtain did not rise and Tõnu did not appear on the scene: simply because the summons was not dispatched. Kremer put it off from day to day, and for no apparent reason. It just seemed to him that the morrow would be more propitious, and the day after looked still better.

One morning he caught sight of Tõnu in the pine-wood, and called to him. But when the man came up, the Baron had nothing to say to him.

"No matter — it has slipped my mind."

Tõnu thought that he might have had the debt in mind. "There's my debt since spring — I'll pay it by working more days in summer."

"No, it wasn't that. It was something else," said Kremer, turning to go. "Drop in at the office some evening, then I'll tell you."

On the evening of the following day Tõnu went to Herr Kremer's study which he called his "office". But he had evidently come too soon, for it took the lord of the manor a long time to make up his mind what to say, and then he merely asked:

"Well, yes — have you spoken to Reemet about the hay and where you can make it?"

"Yes, I have."

"Where did he say you could make hay?"

"In the marsh, of course."

The old gentleman gazed out of the window and mumbled something that sounded almost like — "You might make it on higher ground this year," but Tõnu could not swear to that — perhaps he had not heard right. Then the other suddenly said:

"Look here, Tõnu, you might root out all those barberry bushes round the manor fields in autumn. My brother at Särgvere read in a book that they are harmful to the grain crops. The rust is supposed to come from them."

"But in autumn the truck-gardeners will come and pay for the berries."

"Ah, those cucumber picklers — those rascals pay me next to nothing. The damage is ten times as great. You may begin when the berries have been picked. The faggots will be yours."

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* The curtain can rise. *(German.)*

That was all. And autumn was still far off. Tõnu could not make out why the old man was in such a hurry with those barberry bushes so early in the year.

The next few days Ulrich passed listlessly; he felt strangely annoyed with himself. He could not sort out what was wrong with him. Everything was settled, and yet something was amiss. His heart did not lack courage, but still he felt uneasy. No finger was warning him now or threatening, either — nevertheless he was only marking time. What could it be — what e l s e could there be, he wondered.

Was he ashamed of himself before those two, or before other people?

No, he answered with a sneer which bordered on contempt. Those two and all the others here — let them think what they like of him — their opinion made no difference to him. He had always lived according to his own lights and done what he thought best — he might just as well have felt shy with horses and crows. Only there were three human beings who must not know anything about this — those three at Särgvere, the Three Penguins, and he believed it would not be difficult to keep it a secret from them.

But still Herr Kremer would sit every evening at the open window meditating, although everything seemed to be settled. And he was making no headway, for the cuckoo on the far side of the cabbage patch was gone. Perhaps it had flown somewhere else to replace the nightingale and urge on some slow-witted laggard with its calls.

But a successor there was.

Only it didn't sing, it laughed.

Its hoarse chuckle resounded from the marsh as if it had spied such a fool there as no one had ever set eyes on before.

At first the Baron of Mäeküla took it for a bird, a bird that bleated like a goat, but before long he began to think it must be a human or some sprite in human shape. He seemed to see the tangled hair and a pointed beard, the flat nose and clownish eyes. And when he went on peering, he thought he saw the commencements of horns and a cloven hoof.

Now Kremer's fist crashed down on the window-sill as he rose to his feet, his tusk-like whiskers quivering with resolution, ready for action! He would not stand mocking from anybody!

But he could not go into action straight away, so he began to pace

the whole length of his four rooms as if to gather momentum, and his footsteps had a metallic ring.

What's that? Someone rattling the latch? He went and opened the door. Mari was standing on the threshold of the study, a basket on her arm.

"I brought some eggs to the manor, but there isn't a soul in the kitchen and the back door is locked."

She looked him straight in the mouth, which had dropped open, but as no answer was forthcoming, she went on:

"Perhaps Herr Kremer will take them himself. I can't wait long, I have to go to the store by the church on my way back."

He motioned her to step in, but when she was in the room, he still remained speechless.

As a matter of fact, Kremer was somewhat dazed. He was seeing Mari for the first time in her Sunday apparel, and her face was so clean — so wonderfully clean. Her eyes shone so bright in the clean face that the blue sparks round the dark pupils might easily be counted. Even the suntan was washed off, so that her neck and the soft fullness under her chin were only a shade whiter than her face. And there was something exciting in the bright colours that shone in her kerchief and in her garments, but they all blended into a hazy mist before Kremer's eyes. He was only aware of her small wine-red coif, which glowed like a red-hot coal in a bed of greyish-yellow ashes.

He was at a loss what to do, so he took the basket from Mari's hand and stood, holding it at arm's length with two fingers as if he were weighing the contents.

"I'd like to have the basket back," said Mari with her quick smile, which momentarily sparkled out of a calm and serious face like a flash, and vanished as quickly.

"Back — — yes — — well, let's put them right here — —"

He shifted the basket from his right hand to his left and began to take out the eggs, two at a time, laying them in a row on the writing-table. In his haste he dropped one. Both followed it with their eyes: the glistening yolk was slowly spreading on the floor near the toe of his boot.

Kremer laughed at the sight, his cheeks slightly flushed, but strange to say, Mari remained serious.

"Let me do it, please," said the young woman unruffled and, taking

the basket, she deftly laid the eggs on the green broadcloth top of the writing-table. "Thirty — — counting that one." She pointed to the floor.

Mari's calm, serious manner gave him courage, and with a touch of humour he said, looking down:

"And what shall we do with t h a t o n e?"

"I could clean up the mess, if — — " She looked round the room.

"No, no — I didn't mean that — Vilhelmine can do it."

"She will faint when she sees it."

"Never mind! I'll bring her round again."

Mari probably saw with her mind's eye the picture of Vilhelmine being brought round, and it was too much for her sense of humour: a bright smile lighted up every feature of her clean face, her eyes shone and her distant white teeth flashed, while her high bosom rose and fell as she breathed, overflowing with vital energy.

The effect of all this on Ulrich was such that he all but lost his self-control. He hazily remembered pressing Mari to take some money, more than the eggs were worth. As Mari had no change, he begged her to accept the money, stammering that she would be bringing them eggs again, another time. More clearly he recalled how he had seized her arm when she was on the point of opening the door, and he had hardly recognized his own voice when he said:

"Tell Tõnu to come to the office tomorrow — — no — — let him come tonight!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Leaving Kremer's office, Prillup kept a straight face while the manor-house was still in sight. With eyes cast down and shoulders hunched up, he took himself off obsequiously, stepping cautiously on his long legs. But when he had traversed a distance of some two hundred paces, he looked back and chuckled. After a few steps he looked back again and laughed out loud. Skirting the hazel coppice, he soon reached higher ground, where the Kruusimäe uplands began, and here he repeated the performance for the third time. Then he pulled himself up to his full height and for a long time gazed intently at the manor-house glowing red in the last rays of the setting sun. All at once, baring his teeth in a grimace and twisting his hairy face, he spluttered again with uncontrollable mirth like a hedgehog. Almost choking with laughter, convulsively holding his sides, he uttered between outbursts:

"What a joke! — — What a capital joke — — I'll have to tell everybody!"

Only when he had completely recovered from his violent fit of laughing, did Prillup continue his way homeward. Blinking his wet eyes he looked around, hoping to see someone who would be the first to listen to his ridiculous story. But there was nobody around, the road was deserted. In his shaggy beard, which all but covered his cheek bones, a sly smile still lurked, the aftermath of his violent fit of laughter, when suddenly a new idea occurred to him, which for the time being dispersed all traces of mirth.

"Perhaps he was only pulling my leg? — — Simply wanted to make a fool of me? — — Too young for the old rogue? — — Wonders what she would say — — And when she hears — —!"

With his head on one side, Prillup stared down at his feet and once more recalled all the details of what he had just heard and seen. But he evidently arrived at some new decision, which ousted the thought that had crossed his mind, for again an amused smile lighted up his hairy face. Suddenly he stuck his fingers into his beard and raised a wet tuft of it to his nose, sniffing at it noisily. "Hm! Hell of a good wine! Sweet as juice, but how it twists and turns inside!" Prillup had drunk two tumblers of port wine at the office and forgotten to wipe his mouth.

Grinning broadly, he made his way towards the gate, with the thumb of his right hand pressed deep into the pit of his stomach, where the baron's wine was still weaving back and forth merrily. He was firm in his decision that he would tell the silly story he had just heard at the office to the first person he met on the way, so that other people might also have a good laugh; when all of a sudden something quite unexpected happened to him, something he himself could not account for. He turned aside from the path and there, just where three heavy-crowned pines grew on the sandy slope, he suddenly lost his foothold, stumbled and fell full length on the scanty grass and lay there face upwards.

The milk! The manor milk!

Still as a log he lay, gazing into the sunset with wide open eyes, his head resting on his folded hands. The western sky still glowed with all the shades of red and yellow. Just above the horizon, in the middle of the arch, there hung a black cloud in the shape of a heraldic double-eagle with such a sharp clear outline that the bird seemed to be shielding an opening through which the brilliancy of heaven was focused on its back. And other sky monsters were creeping towards the flaming west, some resembling earthly beasts, others strange and weird — and their edges began to glow brightly as they drew nearer to the eagle. But soon the brightness grew fainter and gradually faded, the colours dimmed, until finally Tõnu's face looked blue like the face of a man choked to death.

But he still lay there without stirring a limb. Little black ants ran over his neck and arms, for his head happened to be lying very near an anthill, and one ant scuttled over his beard and across his lips.

At last he became conscious of the tickling and began to brush off the ants. He was sitting up now, wildly waving his hands before his face as if warding off mosquitoes, and then sprang to his feet. A shadow of his recent mirth still played round his hairy cheeks.

But when Tõnu was back on the road again and saw old man Ots ahead of him stumping along with a bundle of stakes for rake-handles on his back, he did not quicken his step to overtake the old man. Nor had Tõnu anything to say to Little Yüri's wife Krõõt when she passed him on the village green. He made straight for his own gate, so deeply engrossed in thought that he passed within a few yards of the big communal swing and did not even hear their neighbour's daughters' greeting.

The dog Kaaru met him at the gate, wagging his tail so violently that his hindquarters were wagging too, and he grinned and whined with sheer pleasure, showing his white teeth. But his master had nothing to say to him, either. When he had shut the gate behind him, he stopped in the yard and stared vacantly down at the dog, which was Kaaru's only reward. To the dog it seemed most uncanny that his master should stand so long in one place and stare at the ground, that he thought it best to make himself scarce and disappeared in the dusk which was now enveloping the yard like a grey dust cloud, blurring the outlines and making everything look unnaturally big.

Prillup was about to enter the cottage when he caught sight of three grey figures on the fence beside the barn, and he turned his steps in that direction. Like a huge grey owl with an owlet under either wing, Mari sat there with Yuku and Anni cuddled close to her, all three looking intently towards the marsh.

"What marvels are you gaping at anyway?" said the father, smiling.

"We are listening to the Tapu folk," said Anni in a whisper. "Sh! sh! don't make a sound."

In truth, the evening was so breathlessly still and the cool air so rarefied, that the sound of talking and laughter from Tapu village was carried as far as the Kruusimäe uplands, although Tapu was situated on a high slope away on the other side of the low marsh. Moreover, the voices sounded so loud and clear that the invisible speakers might have been standing behind the nearest bush. Some of the words were lost, as if blotted out, and the connection between the bits that reached the ear was often ambi-

guous, so that the whole, when linked together, was a queer medley of sense and nonsense.

Strange to say, the three on the fence did not laugh at what they heard. Their expressions were tensely serious, only now and again the children looked up inquiringly at the mother.

Now the rumble of an invisible cart was heard, an invisible horse snorted; somebody coughed, somebody whistled; a sheep bleated somewhere and a dog started barking — and it was impossible to say whether all these sounds were on the earth or in the air, whether they were real or only imagined. And the intervals of silence were so intense that you seemed to hear your neighbour's thoughts, and also your own.

"Supper's on the table — we've had ours already," said Mari without turning her head.

"Aren't you coming in yet?"

"We'll come presently."

"Some novelty — this — — why can't you listen another time —?"

"You go in, father, — you're spoiling it all!" said Yuku.

Prillup was in bed when they came in, but he was still wide awake. The children remained in the kitchen, they slept there, and Mari began to clear the table.

"Shall I ask her or shall I not?" wavered Tõnu under the blanket.

Silence now reigned in the kitchen, the door was closed. Mari climbed into bed. Now's the right moment, thought Tõnu and smiled in anticipation.

But a picture instantly rose before his eyes — the picture of Mari and the children sitting on the fence, listening to the mysterious sounds coming from Tapu village. And something resembling fear laid its cold finger on his lips. He decided to wait until Mari asked him why the old man had summoned him to the office.

But Mari is not curious, he knows that, and so his waiting is hopeless. He hears her yawn and sigh before she falls asleep, her warm back pressed against him. He listens to her sweet youthful breathing. And all night Prillup remains alone with that silly nonsense which he had at first been so eager to tell everybody. He turns it over and over in his mind till the morning dawns.

Then he gets up with a firm resolution: he will speak to her when the moment is ripe, when she will take it for what it is worth, and not simply

as a joke. Let it be a joke, if she wishes to take it that way, but it could also be considered seriously, if that seemed preferable.

Why, it certainly can be taken both ways! Whichever way you look at it — all's well and good. And it does not matter which way it turns out — either way will be satisfactory. At least it will be something to talk about.

So he lets the day pass because it does not seem propitious and his choice falls on the next, which seems to be more favourable. This happens to be a Sunday — the day of rest. It is easier to reason with a person when he is not exhausted with toil.

So, when they are having dinner together — the children had had theirs earlier and had run out to play — and when Mari has done speaking about their cow, which had to be lifted to her feet that spring and still does not want to give milk because the sand and stones on the grazing-land are not fit to eat, then Prillup strokes his beard and says:

"Well, if you want us to have plenty of milk, then it's up to you — do what the old Baron wishes — then we can swim in milk and wade knee-deep in butter."

Mari raises her eyes and looks at him quizzically. Prillup chuckles noisily.

"Yes, upon my word, that's the truth, God's truth — You remember — I went there on Friday evening — you yourself brought word — — Well, he's all alone, you know, doesn't go visiting or anything — nor is he fond of hunting — hasn't even got a dog — — the evenings are long and lonely, he says — — he'd like nothing better than — — — and he'd take the milk-carrying away from Yaan and give it to us —"

Mari looks at him askance, her expression intensely serious.

"He promised to draw up a contract at once, like a good fellow, if only you" — (Tõnu's teeth flash between his hairy lips) — — "if only you yourself — — and then we could move to the Kuru cottage — —"

Mari takes a handful of potato peelings from the table and throws them deliberately into his face. She has nothing to say — nothing to add.

And that is the end of the joke — take it whichever way you like.

Prillup's eyes grow dark, his face is a blank, two potato peels are caught in his beard and hang there.

"You were going to put new hoops on the tub today," says the young wife at last and rises from the table.

Tõnu has also finished eating. "Yes, I'll see to that at once." He wipes his mouth and brushes away the potato peels. "I wonder if it isn't about time I went to the fishing-village and got some fresh herring — what's left is so awfully salty and dry — and anyway there aren't many left on the bottom of the barrel, I think."

"Aren't they too skinny at this time of the year!"

"Most likely they are, but still — fresh fish is fresh fish."

He strides towards the door and on the threshold he stretches himself mightily. He feels light-hearted and his laugh bubbles from his throat like the crystal-clear water in a spring.

"The old man's gone crazy — really crazy, you see that now. Don't be offended — there's no fool like an old fool."

Mari is calmly clearing the table with her back to the door where Prillup is standing. A shaft of golden sunlight falls on the downy hairs curling on the back of her neck, tinging them with red.

"And I — well, only today I blurted it out to you — — just for the fun of it — I didn't mean — well, I thought there was no harm — — And I told him so right to his face — I asked him if — at his age — — the devil of an old reprobate that he is!" Prillup winds up and goes out. This is just one of those situations when it is useless to wait for an answer from Mari.

But when Prillup is out in the yard, her carefree humming reaches him from the open window of the back room:

In winter time . . .
On land and sea . . .

Hay-making in the meadow began that Monday. The grass was tough and wiry, the scythes had to be whetted continually, their melodious ring echoing and re-echoing. Rejoicing in his strength, Prillup swung his scythe from right to left, cutting a wide swath, for his arms were almost as long as his legs. He found pleasure in the thought that he would finish his piece in good time and would be going home earlier than the others, with the rays of the sun falling warm on his back. To be strictly honest, only now did he feel how good it was to go home, and the other men teased him, saying that Prillup was still in his wedding-shirt (there were no women in the manor meadow yet, they would come later to rake the hay). And Prillup laughed too, and boasted of his wife's youthfulness and made fun of

Little Yüri, whose wife was getting old and wrinkled. It seemed to Prillup that never before had he been so well content with his life.

In a few days, however, Tõnu's enthusiasm began to ebb. He stopped to whet his scythe too often, he lighted his pipe too frequently, he made longer breaks than seemed necessary, and he gazed long into a shallow pool left by the spring floods, or he simply stared into the stream, scratching the back of his head. And in the evening he plodded homeward up the slope towards Kruusimäe so slowly that one might think a wrinkled old wife like Little Yüri's Krõõt was waiting for him, and not Mari. And then one evening he did not go straight home. Having hidden his scythe in a bush on the slope, he made his way stealthily along dry-stone walls and across the fields towards the big pasture where the Kuru farm lay near the road between the manor fields and the meadow.

Prillup himself could not have said what had brought him here — it was the direction his feet had taken. It was cloudy and dusk was falling, but he still loitered behind the bushes between the hayfield and grainfield belonging to the Kuru farm, until at length he climbed the low dry-stone wall and found himself on the grazing moor, where he crouched under a barberry bush on a knoll with a good view of the Kuru farmyard. Between his fingers he was twisting a few thick green stems of young barley and some long rye stalks plucked from Kuru's field.

He witnessed a busy scene in the farmyard: the wife came out with the lunch-bag, the daughter brought a small keg of milk from the barn: the son, a mere boy, appeared with a sack of hay. All these were put on the waggon, already loaded with milk casks, which stood by the gate behind the reddish gelding. It was no easy matter to make room for everything: besides the casks of milk and the box of butter there were two calves in the waggon, helplessly moving their large flexible ears in the straw behind the tailboard. And at last Yaan with the nodding head made his appearance, wearing high black boots and a white scarf round his neck, and swinging a whip in his hand. Casually he jumped to the driver's seat and calling a final order over his shoulder, he rode off with the soft steady crunching of wheels along the sandy lane.

Early in the morning he would arrive in town and his load would soon be turned into money. The milk, the butter and the two calves — in a couple of hours they would be rustling paper bills and clinking silver. This

mysterious metamorphosis took place three or four times a week. And in between the grain grew at the home-farm to feed him and his beasts.

Prillup's eyes followed the waggon — the rye stalk was now in his mouth, the barley stems in his hand. His teeth were busy chewing the rye stalk, his fingers busy twisting the barley. So lush were the green stems that his fingers were wet with their juice and a pungent smell reached his nose. He scrambled to his feet only when the waggon had passed two field gates and Yaan Kuru's black cap, bobbing up and down, had disappeared at last where the road made a sudden dip.

A couple of days later Prillup's tall spare figure appeared at the open window of the milk-house, which had a back room where the milk was set to sour and a front room where the butter was churned. There was a door in the partition separating the two rooms. And Yaan Kuru's wife was busy in the front room, turning the handle of a huge butter churn, and Yaan himself was in the back room emptying a tub of warm milk. Their daughter, a girl in her teens, was ladling the milk into creamers which he took and placed on the wide shelves running in four tiers along the whole length of the wall. Mistress Reemet and the milkers, who had carried in the tub, had already left.

"Good day! More power to your elbow!"

Yaan is in no hurry to answer the greeting of a nobody. He recognizes Prillup's voice, but does not even turn his head and pads across the floor towards the shelves with a creamer in his hands, his dirty thumbs immersed in the milk up to the joint. On the way back he glances at the figure that has appeared at the window.

"Good day! — Liisu, hand over some empties!"

Tõnu leans his shoulder against the window-frame and lets his eye wander over the single and double rows of creamers on the shelves. His hairy face wears an ingratiating smile.

"Well, well! You sure have got the stuff — and plenty of it." He sniffs noisily, raising his nose high. "And the smell — it's fairly suffocating."

"We could do with more — lots more."

"Does it sell so well?"

"It's bound to! Good sour milk — it's in demand in the summertime, and when it's from Mäeküla . . .!"

"So they're crazy for it, eh?"

Kuru raises his head. His nose sticks up, red and very sharp, with the skin peeling off from constant exposure to the sun, while his small pig-eyes peer out as blue as forget-me-nots.

"Didn't you know that the milk from Mäeküla is famous?"

"You don't say so!"

"Why, goodness me! You should see them at the market — it's our milk they're demanding all the time — the milk from Mäeküla isn't thin and watery like what you get from some others — and some shopkeepers buy it too. Not so full, Liisu!"

"So Old Whiskers' cows give such rich milk!"

"Cows?? Listen to him, Viiu — he thinks it's the cows!" Yaan looks over the top of the creamer towards the front room where his wife is churning butter, and smiles his usual sour smile, which almost closes the little blue eyes in his broad flat face. "So that's all you know, my man, about the dairy business."

"Well, yes, of course — the milk must be well set and thick, not too sour — everybody knows that," Prillup hastens to explain. "And naturally it's not the cows that make it sour — it's the dairyman."

"Now you've got it right." Yaan carries the creamer to the shelf, wipes the front of his striped vest with his sleeve and returns, picking his nose. "And the milk alone wouldn't do the trick — if it weren't for those golden bricks over there."

"So they're crazy for your butter too, I see."

"I can't complain on that score. Those townfolk know what's what, I guess. The cooks and kitchenmaids get strict orders from their mistresses to buy only the butter with a rose stamped on it — that's the Mäeküla trademark — a rose on each pound. The butter from Mäeküla doesn't taste of butter-milk, or anything else — Viiu, when you take the cream from that big pan over there, see if there isn't a mouse in it — I thought I saw the end of a tail."

He sticks his thumbs into the milk again and turns towards the shelves. He is rather broad in the beam like a woman, and his legs are short — all hidden in a pair of the widest and loosest of breeches. At home the milkman of Mäeküla wears home-made raw-hide sandals.

"But you said there wasn't enough — that you could do with more — —" Tõnu's sympathetic eye roves along the rows of creamers that

line the wall, and his gaze lingers on the pans full of heavy cream visible through the door in the other room.

— — "Well, why not have the old man get more cows, then."

The master of Kuru is silent for some time; he has found some cockroaches in the milk nearest to the wall, and he is fishing them out with his fingers. He throws the dead insects coated with cream down on the pitted clay floor, swearing under his breath.

"Get more cows — my eye! It's easier said than done. Cows can't be bought at the fair without money, you know. Or should I buy them myself and let him have them as a gift!"

"But there was talk of sowing more clover because he intended to increase the herd."

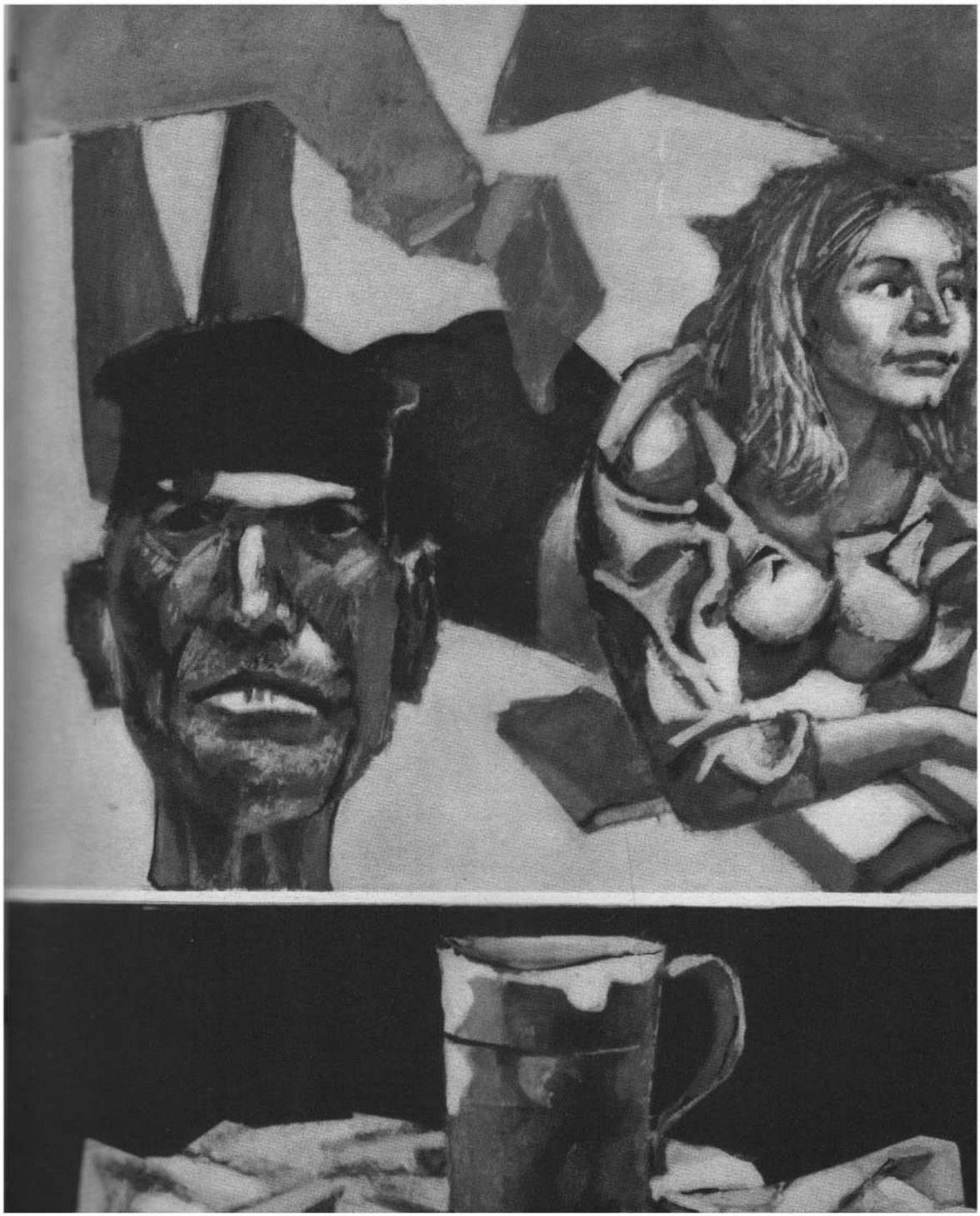
"Yes, yes — my dear fellow — he would — if he could get more credit from Yaan Kuru's bank." The sour smile, which is meant for the wife in the other room, is broader this time so that his teeth — the strong white teeth of a peasant — are revealed between his bluish lips. "In that case he might as well build a new cow-shed and a new stable, and finish the second storey of the manor-house — why not?"

Here the conversation is interrupted by shrill cries coming from the other side of the wall — the living-quarters of the cowherd and his family. Kai's last-born is shrieking as if red-hot tongs were pinching it, and soon a couple of the next youngest burst out crying in sympathy, and then the long drawn-out wail of a woman's voice joins them.

Now Prillup thinks he should pass the time of day with Yaan's wife, Viiu, and take a look at the butter-churning. He steps round the corner to have a better look in at the front window, which faces the road. But that window is shut, because of the dust most likely, since many waggons pass along the road. Perhaps he ought to be leaving now — he is carting hay from the meadow behind the orchard today and he took the time from his lunch hour to come here — but he is reluctant to leave the place yet and he squeezes past the pile of faggots and the mound of peat, back towards the side window.

The shrieks and wails on the other side of the wall are quieting down. Tõnu rests his elbows on the window-sill and tries to think of something to say.

"But let's say that some of those golden bricks happen to be left



over — they're absolutely without salt and the weather's hot — well, if some of those golden bricks" (the name seems to give him pleasure) "are left on your hands, what do you do then?"

"I bury the dead."

"You bury — —?"

"Yes, that's what I do. What else can I do with it if it's dead?"

Yaan's daughter begins to giggle, so does his wife in the adjacent room. She appears on the threshold.

"Don't mind him — that's the milkmen's jargon. They pack the butter that's left over into a crock and sell it as cooking-butter at a lower price, that's all."

"Well, well — so that's what it is!" Now it's Prillup's turn to laugh — "So it's dairy butter so long as it's a golden brick in a box, but when it's stuffed into a crock — it becomes cooking-butter in a jiffy!"

Tõnu's narrow sharp shoulders shake with laughter, his hairy mouth is wide open. The Kuru people cannot remember that they have ever heard him laugh so gaily.

"Well, but it doesn't happen often — with everybody." Yaan is heard to mumble as he removes the first crop of flies from the pans of warm milk. "Those who bury the dead are always the ones who don't know how to keep the living alive, such as" — and Yaan names a number of milkmen from the neighbouring parishes, but the Mäeküla milkman is not among them.

A last Prillup gets over his fit of laughing and his voice is still weak when he gets his breath back and says:

"But those calves, only three days old, hardly dry yet — you don't make much on those, do you?"

"Why not?"

"The butchers can surely see —"

"What can they see? It's not written on a calf's forehead whether it's three days old or six."

"He could feel it with his hand."

"Let him feel it — still he can't tell how many days old it is. They stop the milkmen on the road and bargain with them at the taverns on the way, and usually they're tipsy. If you've got the gift of the gab — well, you can always make enough on calves to cover your roadhouse expenses, and buy a pair of boots, and the colouring stuff for the butter, too."

"Well, that's something you need lots of, I suppose." Tõnu turns with a polite smile towards Viiu, who is still standing in the doorway.

"In winter of course, but not in summer. Some buyers are even shy of butter that is too yellow."

Just then some urgent duty calls Yaan and his family to the "butter factory", and while they are gone the visitor takes his leave.

When Jaan Kuru notices that the shadow at the window has disappeared, he takes a long-handled spoon and makes the sign of the holy cross over the milk in the back room, and over the cream and butter in the front room.

"Who knows — he may have an evil eye — — We'll have to keep that window shut, too."

But a secret power keeps drawing the feet of the Kruusimäe cottar towards the tenant farm of the manor milkman. On his way home from church the following Sunday when Tõnu is about to pass the Kuru gate, he does not hesitate long, but turns right in. His Sunday drop of gin has given him courage and makes him disregard that which for years has separated him and the other cottars from the Kuru tenant farmer. He knows exactly what to say to Yaan so as to make himself agreeable as a guest in the house. As a matter of fact, everybody in the parish knows Yaan's pet theme, the cottars of Kruusimäe in particular.

The Kuru family are having their midday meal. The father and mother are seated, the son and daughter are standing. The father is relating something to the mother and, as the visitor happens to be only one of the Kruusimäe cottars, the mother alone answers his greeting while the speaker goes right on with his story:

"My good fellow, I said to him, you should think a little before speaking — open your eyes and see in whose presence you are. Once you have begun to ask and beg, it won't do to stick up your nose and blow out your chest. What would happen if every miserable beggar could come and stand up to you? You may be in the right — ten times over — but why raise your voice? You have a tongue in your head, haven't you? Yes, I used to eat hogwash — that's so, I don't deny it — but what I used to be is neither here nor there — it's what I am now that counts. But you, my good fellow, you're in such a bad way that hunger will soon twist your empty guts into a knot."

First the girl begins to giggle, then the boy follows suit, but their mother remains serious. In her longish face, which has lost the rosiness of youth except for some russet patches, only a fold between the brows moves slightly as she shifts her gaze, ever so little, from the spoon in her hand towards the door. But Prillup says:

"Well, well — you sure gave it to him hot! Who was the bastard, I wonder?"

The master of Kuru swallows a few mouthfuls, then with a sneer he tells his wife how the encounter ended, and only then mentions the lout's name, flinging it over his shoulder at Tõnu. It is not one of the Kruusimäe cottars — oh no, nor is he among the poorest. It happens to be a tenant farmer of their own parish, who isn't so badly off, either. Hearing that, Prillup shrugs his shoulders and the hint of a smile lurks in the hairs on his cheeks.

"Well, you have made the most of your opportunities, Yaan, there's no gainsaying that — — it's fate. And the golden bricks have done their share, and the thick sour milk!"

Yaan goes on eating. There's pea soup and boiled pork on the table. He cuts the soft white fatty meat with his pocket knife and carries the piece between knife and thumb to his mouth, which is already shiny with grease. Ever since the visitor came to the door, the pork seems to taste particularly good, for his expression has turned sweeter and he smacks his lips with greater relish. The beads of sweat on the round bald spot on the top of his head twinkle merrily.

"However that may be" — he goes on chewing — "God knows what He gives and to whom He gives — — but what has been trusted to me is more than I'll ever need in my lifetime" — — sighing — "the children will find some day —"

"Why don't you take a seat on the bench over there, Tõnu?" interrupts the wife in her colourless voice.

Now, for the first time Yaan turns his greasy chin and looks at Tõnu full-face.

"Why on the bench? Take a chair and sit down to table with us!" — To his son he says, "If you've had enough, fold your hands and leave the table. Why are you yawning and staring here anyway? — — Well, Tõnu, help yourself if you care for what we have to offer."

"I'm not one to pick and choose — how could I be? — I don't remember when we last had meat. Salt sprats is all we can expect. Well, thank you all the same. But you see — I've got three children at home, waiting for their Sunday buns."

"Three? Who's the third?" asks the milkman's wife with a smile.

"The tallest one, of course. Somehow I can't think of her as a wife yet — have to get used to it. Not that she's so young in years — but her ways — —"

"So you're not quite satisfied with her?"

"It's not that — I'm satisfied — certainly I'm satisfied — she's done nothing wrong — only sometimes I can't sort of think of her apart from my two children. And at other times — you know how it is with those people from the Forest parish — they are somehow different from our people — one way or another. Sometimes I can't make her out, as it were — but I'm satisfied —"

"Well then, step nearer and make a meal of it for one — not three, I warrant," decides the master of the house and Tõnu does not remonstrate any longer.

"Where are you coming from? The round-about way from church? You used to always go bare-footed across Mädakaela bog."

"Yes, I'm coming from church." Prillup seats himself on the chair that Villu has placed for him near the table. "That chap Trumm gave me a lift in his cart — so I didn't have to take off my boots a second time."

"So you go to church alone?"

"Well, yes — the youngsters wouldn't stay at home if Mari went to church — oh, goodness no! — — And it always happens that one of them hasn't got a new kerchief to put on, the other hasn't got a cap — — can't afford to buy them everything they want."

For a while everybody eats in silence. They make a noise sipping their soup, but the smacking of Yaan's lips is the loudest of all. The smell of whisky is in the air. Liisu notices that Prillup's fingers shake as he steers the spoon to his mouth rather unsteadily. His eyes are shifty and his cheeks are flushed. Feeling the girl's gaze on him, he suddenly looks straight at her across the table, and she cannot make out whether there is rebuke in his eyes or fear.

Liisu has had enough, she folds her hands and leaves the room together

with her brother. Closing the door, she throws a fleeting glance towards Prillup's back. It seems to her that even his hair is quivering.

All the same Prillup suddenly begins quite calmly:

"Yes, that's the way it always is with these worldly goods. Take for instance the breadwinner of this here family. I've often wondered and thought to myself, what in the world he'll do with all his money if he goes on drudging another ten years."

"Another ten years?" — Yaan smiles a sour smile. "I'm not off my head yet, my dear fellow! Half the night I squat in the waggon, squeezed between the crates and casks, the other half I crouch on the bench of some wayside tavern, trying to get a wink of sleep — year in, year out — always on the road — be it damned! I want to be my own master, once and for all, and take it easy. Let the hired help sweat and toil! Another year or two — not more — will see me living on my own land — my very own — and then —"

"Help yourself to the meat, Prillup, you've eaten next to nothing," says Viiu.

But Prillup does not hear her, he has ears only for the man who will soon be his own master, living on his own land.

"Well, you'll choose a farm on that side of the river — some three or four hundred acres, I suppose — there are none on this side worth buying," says Prillup, the while staring into the bowl and dipping his spoon into the soup as if the peas refused to be captured.

Yaan makes no answer for some time, his eyes are glued to a little pool of peasoup on the table in front of him. Then he lifts up his nose, rolls his head, and with a whining laugh he says condescendingly:

"Who knows but that I may have the wherewithal to take two such farms — or perhaps — but it's too early to say anything for certain — but it may turn out to be one of the smaller estates — an estate with a dairy farm, maybe."

And for a second Yaan's forget-me-not blue eyes look straight into those of his visitor.

Prillup's spoon remains suspended in mid-air, his mouth open — waiting. And a moment passes before he utters a muffled — "You don't say so!"

But then he goes on more eagerly than ever: "Well, of course, it couldn't be otherwise — dear me, it's bound to come." And when he has swallowed

the spoonful, his narrow chest and sharp shoulders shake with his loud guffaws as he looks from one to the other, and even the beard covering his cheeks joins in with his unselfish good wishes.

And now his meal is made. Viiu, who has been rolling bread crumbs on the table with her little finger, looks up. She presses Tõnu to have some more, but in vain. He puts down his spoon, closes his pocket-knife and pushes his chair back from the table, after first expressing his thanks by shaking hands with his host and hostess. He wipes his fingers on the loosely hanging tops of his high boots.

"Perhaps you dropped in on business, Prillup?" he is asked.

"Business? Oh, yes, I nearly forgot! — I had in mind old Mihkel Tiits, who's going to the fishing-village tomorrow night to buy some fresh fish for Whitsuntide — we might get some for you, if you like —"

But Yaan has only recently brought some herring from town: he always buys his fish in town.

"Well, of course — of course —. It just occurred to me when I was passing your gate — thought I'd just step in and let you know — never mind — —"

Outside it was sultry, the air was hot and oppressive, the scanty grass was drying up, revealing the greyish clayey surface of the grazing moor. For some time Prillup walked on with his eyes almost shut. His step was light and springy, his head was clear. He didn't even notice when he passed the forge, the shrubbery, the hazel coppice behind the barn. But when he was approaching the gate leading to the Kruusimäe village green, he stopped just opposite the three gnarled pines. Their forked shadows on the sandy slope looked like huge crooked hands straining towards him, eager to clutch him. And here his strength suddenly failed him. He sat down on a big stone by the side of the road, took his head between his hands and moaned softly.

CHAPTER SIX

It is the morning of Midsummer Day. The sun has risen high up in the sky and, peeping into Prillup's hot bedchamber, it finds the newly-weds still fast asleep. The sun is not surprised at this, for they had been to St. John's festival with the children last night and did not come home till the bonfire had died down and turned to grey ashes. The sun is not in the least surprised, but smiles and rises higher.

It is only Tõnu who is sleeping, though. His young wife is awake. With her elbow on the straw bolster and, propping her cheek with her fist, she gazes at Tõnu in his slumbers. He is lying on his back with his hands on his stomach, chin raised high and mouth open. The whole of his chest is revealed, his shirt-sleeves are rolled up — the bedcovers have slipped down. All that is visible of his body is covered with thick woolly hair — his chest, neck, jaws, cheeks, arms and hands. The grimy coat of wool, soft and shiny, has spread over all — only on the hands is it sparser; and almost imperceptibly, without getting thicker or longer it passes into the patchy beard on his face and the tangled hair on his head; the beard all but reaches the cheekbones, his hair begins not far above the brows. Tufts of long hairs grow out of his nostrils and a few fine strands stick out of his ears.

The young wife is sorely tempted by her husband's natural coat of fur. Her gaze wanders up and down his chest, strays to his arms and face, only to return to the chest again. Her free hand rises furtively and brushes the crest of that furry bosom back and forth, lightly and tenderly, as a timid child would caress a sleeping dog. Having

satisfied this wish, she draws her hand back and resumes her gazing, when suddenly her eyes sparkle with amusement, for she has just recalled a picture in her school book. She purses her lips as she whispers the word "orangutan".

And suddenly a longing comes over her, a passionate desire, and she cannot resist the temptation: she wants to set fire to that thick growth of soft shiny hair on his chest and watch it blaze away like wildfire. Tõnu always keeps his pipe and tobacco at the head of the bed. She stretches out her hand for the matchbox, and carries the game so far that she strikes a match and waits for the sulphur to melt and the flame to grow.

But the sleeper stirs, smacks his lips and opens his eyes. "What's that? What's happened?" he mutters groggily as he passes the back of his hand over his sweaty brow. His close-set reddish brown eyes wander here and there uncertainly, and to Mari it seems that lately they have sunk deeper into the caverns out of which they glimmer.

"I was just going to set you on fire," answers Mari.

"Set me — on fire! Why?" Tõnu's eyes are now focused on Mari's hand, where the match is still burning between her fingers.

"You are so hairy."

Tõnu yawns. "Haven't you noticed that before?"

"No, I haven't."

"Where have your eyes been then?"

"Don't know."

Tõnu yawns again. "Go ahead. Set me on fire then."

"I don't want to any more." And Mari throws the spent match over the head of the bed.

"Well, yes, I am hairy — all over, from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. My mother, God bless her soul, always used to say: 'Tõnu, you'll be a rich man. We've never had such a hairy one among our kith and kin — and that's why we're all poor. But you'll be rich'."

"But you aren't."

Prillup has put his hands under his head and is staring at the ceiling with a smile on his lips. The hairs round his mouth are quivering with eagerness, his voice is soft and dreamy.

"So far I haven't got rich — not yet. — — — That's what my mother used to say. My father was of a different opinion. He would say: 'That's

idle talk, only women's jabber. Who's going to give you anything for nothing? Or who'll you take it from? We're not that kind of men that'll go and take anything — not my father, nor me, nor you, my boy — none of us have got it in us. Perhaps if something is right under your nose you might want to take it. But when you get that far, you find somebody's already taken it. So there you are! Better not wish for anything, or even think about it, but just lay your tired body to rest at night, and sure enough your head will rise from the pillow in the morning, and it will have risen for the last time when one morning finds you stark and cold. Salt fish and bread, a puff at the pipe, and a swig of whisky — that's what the Prillups have always had, and you'll not be without'."

"What did your mother say to that?"

"Mother kept to her own belief. If a boy is hairy, and if you pray to God, then nothing is impossible. So keep on praying to God, who has given you the hairs."

"What did your father say then?"

"Well, father had nothing to say against God, of course. He wasn't a pagan. But once he got real mad — perhaps he'd taken two swigs instead of one that time. They had just come home from church and he began ranting — how was a man to know to whom he should pray so as to get rich? To God or to the devil? See, the devil himself is supposed to be hairy, but not God — nobody has ever heard of God being hairy. To me he said quite crossly: 'Better not pray to either. Nothing will come of it. Salt fish and bread you'll have without praying'."

Prillup smiles, still gazing up at the ceiling. "The old man was queer sometimes."

"Who did you believe, your father or your mother?"

"Me? In the end I came to believe them both."

"How — both?" The young wife is playing with the match-box.

"You see, Mari, sometimes a man gets to thinking, especially when he is young: why not buckle your belt, cock your hat and go out into the world? He figures that if others have found something, why not he. And maybe something worthwhile will come his way, if he's lucky. He's no worse than the others; like everybody else he's got eyes to see and ears to hear, and if his hands at first haven't got the skill, they'll soon learn, I suppose, because they move on joints and are not stiff like sticks — only

so as to get out of this gravel pit in the marshes once and for all. Why, just like Mihkel Vutt from the other side of the marsh. He could do a little carpentry — not much, of course — he'd only learnt some woodwork on his own, he knew as much about it as me or anybody else. But see — he tucked an axe under his belt one day and went away. Somehow, I can't do it. I think about going away, but I don't go. I only get as far as the threshold, but never beyond it. It's as if someone were pulling me back."

"What became of that Mihkel?"

"Why, he's well off now. He owns three houses at Kassisaba, one with a store in it — First he knocked about, doing carpentry here and there at the manor-houses, then he went to town and became a building-contractor. Goodness knows how he got on to it. And now he builds houses for other people, and some timber is always left over, so that after a time Mihkel builds a house for himself, too."

"That's a very cheap way to build a house."

"I should say so," says Prillup chuckling. "And now he's a toff — looks on with his hands in his pockets while the hired men do the work for him. And he's not the only one I know. I used to work with a chap Mart down in the village, before my father died. 'What the hell!' he says one evening. 'I'm getting bored with this life. Better to go and steal a horse somewhere, or find myself a wife who's got some dough laid aside?' And when St. George's day comes, he buckles up and goes away. I don't know how many horses he stole before he found a rich wife, but what I do know is that Mart has a big round belly now and he's been the owner of a pub in Paldiski for some years already. While Tõnu only stepped into his father's shoes, and he is still squatting in the same old place. Tõnu braces himself for a leap — but he doesn't budge."

Stroking Tõnu's nose with the match-box, his wife says: "See how this nose of yours also wants to rise towards the sky, but soon it'll come down where it belongs."

"I might get out of this place too, nobody can stop me," he goes on, quite unaware of Mari's gentle thrust. "Or I might make a start right here. The days I have to work in the manor fields to pay off the rent still leave me some free time, and piecework doesn't pay — the baron pays mighty little for piecework. But I haven't got any go in me, it's not in my blood, I suppose. Take, for instance, that Yaak of Siim-Yüri from across the river at

Tapu. He used to rent a cottar's plot like me. About twelve or thirteen years ago he started selling apples and berries — at first near the church on Sundays, on other days at market in town, all the fruit that the orchard of one estate yielded. Then he went and rented two or three apple orchards, and began taking the fruit to Petersburg, and then he bought up potatoes and eggs too, and all went to Petersburg. Now the fellow owns a nice big farm, paid for and all, near the railway, and he keeps up the trade for all it's worth, believe me."

"You don't envy him, do you?"

Now Mari has picked up the tobacco pouch and is dangling it by the string.

"Envy? No, I just let my tongue run away with me. You were asking whom I believed — my father or my mother. I believed my father, seeing I'm neither a doer nor a go-getter. But perhaps my mother was right too. Something might just turn up, though, if I'm lucky."

"Something will just pop into your mouth, you mean."

"Well, one way or another, something may come my way, you know. Something that's meant for me. It needn't be anything high and mighty, like that crippled tailor's luck in the other parish, where the court of law is looking for the rightful heir to whom the three thousand ought to go — an inheritance left by an unknown relative somewhere in the Crimea or the Caucasus. But it may come some other way, little by little."

"But your mother told you to pray to God. Have you prayed?"

With mouth still open, Prillup slowly shifts his gaze from the ceiling to the dangling tobacco pouch, then eyelids and lashes shade his brown eyes. A moment passes before he blurts out:

"I go to church, don't I? And sometimes to prayer meetings, too."

"Yes — but that's where everybody goes."

"But there wasn't anything to pray for like that, nothing worthwhile that I longed for so very much."

"So you believed your father all along, and only lately you've begun to believe your mother, isn't that so?"

With a movement of his shoulders, Tõnu gives a grunt or two as he squints searchingly towards the sooty ceiling again before he sets his jaw square and answers triumphantly:

"Aren't you a silly little goose! Yaan Kuru didn't pray to God on his

bended knees all those years, did he? before he took over the business of carrying the Mäeküla milk to town? If you think so, you're sadly mistaken. Yaan started by saying grace at table with clasped hands only when he began to line his purse, and when it got heavier, he started those Bible-readings at his house. But see, the carrying business came of itself, dropped from the sky at his feet, as it were. He was summoned to the office one day and was told that he could take over the milk carrying on St. George's day, if he wanted to, seeing he lived nearest to the manor house. It was sudden, like a bolt from the blue."

"Why did the other man give up the job?"

"He was the milk carrier on a neighbouring estate and rented a bigger farm so that he can deal in fresh milk now. Well, I don't think Yaan had as much as a hundred roubles saved up at that time — but perhaps he did, because he's got the best piece of land to farm. Well, he went to all his relatives, his own and his wife's, and scraped together as much as was needed for a start, to pay the earnest-money, and to buy the cart and the vessels. And one fine day, believe it or not, Yaan Kuru became a milkman, just like any other milkman — no, not quite the same, of course. At the beginning there was quite a difference. I remember it all as clearly as if it were yesterday."

Tõnu feels that now he has struck the right note. But he would enjoy it more if he could speak with his pipe in his mouth. He reaches for his pipe, but it is not in its customary place at the head of the bed. It is hanging from Mari's mouth, the bowl filled with fresh tobacco, and she is just on the point of striking a match.

"Well, I never! What do you want to make your tongue bitter for?"

"I want to have a try. It'll be yours in a minute."

Seriously and thoughtfully she puffs at the pipe, which drags one corner of her mouth downwards, for she has linked her hands round her knee, and with every puff her cheeks are sucked in and her lips give a smack, and after one or two attempts she manages to send a blue smoke ring into the air.

But Tõnu has no eye for the comic. His hand lies idle, waiting for the pipe, while he goes on talking. As a rule he is not a talkative man; ten sentences a day is the most he deigns to make. But today he has warmed up to his subject and goes on talking so that specks of foam appear at the

corners of his mouth. And when the pipe is handed to him, he is not in the least annoyed that it is only good for a couple of puffs.

"Well, the old booby began going to market in home-made rawhide sandals. The other milkmen looked and wondered where such a beggar had come from: a shame to their trade. They secretly agreed among themselves, as we later heard from Madis Kulp of the pub where the milkmen often stop, yes — and one day, just at the busiest hour, a delegation appeared before Yaan with a pair of old boots, nicely mended with heel plates and all. And they bowed politely and said that they had heard it was his birthday, and wouldn't he accept a little present. And before Yaan could say Jack Robinson, there he was, sitting on the milk-cart. His old sandals were jerked off and the boots were pulled on his feet. And all the while a crowd was looking on. It was a hell of a joke on him all right!

"But of course he didn't keep the boots. After market he threw them into somebody else's cart. But the next time — Yaan went to town in boots. They were of home-tanned leather, but he had smeared them with tar up to the very top. Later he bought a pair of real black boots.

"But the boots weren't enough to make a proper milkman of Yaan. They soon found another fault with him. One day two milkmen took hold of him by the arms, in a friendly manner, and led him off, assuring him that it would be their treat. Yaan thought they were talking him to the pub behind the Town Hall. But there's a barber shop next door, and that's where they went, and Yaan got a haircut.

"But that is all long past. Before two years went by, Yaan stuck his nose up, and as time went on his head began to roll more and more. In his eyes we weren't men any longer, we were only beggars and ragamuffins. Soon he looked down upon almost everybody in the parish — nobody was good enough for him. Now the only talk at the taverns along the way is that Yaan Kuru has made a mint of money —"

"I've got money, I have!" Mari imitates Yaan's sing-song voice.

"Well, well, even you've heard him already. Plenty of gossip goes on behind his back."

"More than I can ever spend," drawls Mari, rolling her head in imitation of Yaan. "The children will have it one day."

"What a memory you have, heh! heh!" Prillup chuckles as he paws her shoulder. "And how clever Yaan is at turning the conversation to the

theme of money, always money. Whether the talk is about the weather-cock on the church steeple, or about a beetle, or a harrow-tooth — Yaan Kuru is bound to end up at his money coffers. And if you yourself have the sense to steer the conversation in the right direction, then he quite forgets your low station in life and may even do you a good turn."

Prillup shifts the cold pipe from one side of his mouth to the other. The corner of his left eye twitches slightly and his toes, which stick out from under the rug, wriggle impatiently. And when at last he continues, his voice comes rumbling from deep down in his chest.

"But let us suppose — Yaan's right. He knows what he's talking about. And if anybody has a reason — let them try to stand up to him. You can't stop a hen cackling when she's laid an egg — it comes natural. Let the rat laugh at the cat from his hole in the floor — the rat's still a rat, and the cat's a cat. And the cat's had a good meal, but the rat's hungry. Well, be a cat if you don't want to be a rat. But until that time comes, you'll laugh at the cat out of envy, and the cat will tease you on purpose when she sees that you envy her. I suppose all the people around here would like to be in Yaan Kuru's shoes, and go bragging at the church and round the public houses; but as it is, you just have to hold your tongue and bow your head when Yaan is around. You know, all the inn-keepers from the church as far as the town bow and scrape to him, although they don't get much cash out of him. He never drinks anything stronger than mead, and he doesn't even smoke — goes to town and comes back like a woman. That story about the boots and the haircut is all forgotten."

In the meantime Mari has been catching flies on the rug, holding them captive in her left hand. And when she turns her head, she finds the brown eyes of the speaker, who is silent now, fixed on her with a look that is almost painful. She releases the captives and refrains from catching more.

"Well, and then?"

Tõnu does not continue for some time. With the stem of his pipe he scratches his hairy cheek here and there, then throws the pipe with a clank back to the head of the bed. His Adam's apple rises perceptibly as he swallows hard. And now his voice is husky and each word is forced out, although he tries to speak with calm indifference.

"There's nothing much to add — except that Yaan Kuru is going to buy an estate."

"Oh!"

"Yaan Kuru has been a milkman for nine years and now he is going to be a landlord. He began his career in rawhide sandals, now he'll put on kid boots and ride in a coach."

"He's only boasting, I'm sure."

"Boasting or not — anybody'd boast if he had the stuff."

"Perhaps he doesn't even know how to count money?"

"Don't you worry — he can count money all right, although he can hardly read a line in a book — he spells like a child. There are estates of different sizes, you know. He wouldn't want Kaikna or Tapu, or even Särgvere. And he'll leave Mäeküla to the old man, and Viduste Kaikna to the milkman who's had the job twice as long. But Laipsalu and Mudriku are also estates, and there are others this side of town and on the other side, in our country and in Livonia, and in Russia. — — What are you laughing at?"

"Imagine Yaan Kuru in a coach! I can't help laughing. Oh, his poor nodding head!"

"Don't let that head worry you, there's nothing wrong with it. See that his coach wheels don't run over you next summer, or the next." Prillup's hands are folded under his head, he is tapping the end of the bed with his toes.

"It may be that he won't buy an estate, he's not sure yet. If he happens to come across some peasant farms, he may buy those. That'll be as good as an estate. And even if he boasts of more than he's really got, and if his savings won't stand more than two farms, or even one large farm — dear me, doesn't that still prove that it's well worth while to carry milk for nine or ten years? Now he can play the gentleman and let his wife play the lady. And it won't take much time to save up what's needed to buy a coach, if that's still lacking. And you keep saying that he only brags! How do you know? I tell you that he isn't merely boasting — he told me as much to my face the other day, and his wife was there too. And you can tell from the look in a man's eyes and from the tone of his voice whether he's in earnest or not. And the old baron himself said — you remember that time I went there — he said to me that the milk-delivering was a gold mine, and that Yaan —"

Suddenly the speaker finds that he has no listener.

Mari, looking out of the window, sees the children romping round the yard in their shirts, the dog yelping at their heels. They're all up and about. She makes a light vault over the tireless speaker, jumps out of bed and slips out of the room. And when at last father Prillup turns towards the little window opposite, he sees the three of them in their long white shirts playfully splashing water at each other from the trough at the well, while the little dog is desperately chasing round, not knowing whose side to take.

Tõnu remains motionless for some time, his face a blank, and to fill the blankness he starts listening to the buzzing of the flies. They get tangled in the hairs on his chest and in his beard, they crawl along his hairy arms and feet and over his eyelids, but Tõnu does not disturb them. He yawns till it hurts and whimpers like a dog with fleas. Then he thrusts his legs out of bed. And when he has put on his trousers, he takes the seat in the corner near the window and rests his elbows on his knees. Holding his head with both hands, he lowers his troubled gaze to the floor, while the yard echoes with screams of merry laughter.

Suddenly Prillup seems to see his first wife, Leenu, standing in the middle of the bright, buzzing room. And the throbbing of his heart is like a welcome to her.

Yes — Leenu would have known what to do. She was sensible, she was a kindred spirit.

But nobody ever desired h e r.

And why did she have to toil from sunrise to sunset, and why did she make others toil? My God! And where has it got us? Mute sorrow fills Tõnu's soul. There stands Leenu — miserable, bony, dry as a tinder, her hands always busy, though nothing to show for it. But she always saw eye to eye with him, she stood by him through thick and thin, she looked him straight in the eye and hung on his words — he wishes she had remained with him longer. Why had she left her home and her husband without prop or stay?

Still it can't be denied that she complained too much. She was always complaining — from morning till night, scolding everybody and everything, the two-legged and the four-legged, the animate and inanimate. She would even find fault with a log of wood or a faggot as though they were alive. During the last few years of her life, her wizened face seemed to

wither into a fungus, harsh and bitter-looking. It was boredom, that perpetual grumbling of hers, although it had become a habit and he did not pay much attention to it towards the end; the more so since she complained quietly and her words of reproach were subdued murmurs, as if spoken only to herself. For it seemed to be an inborn habit, like the instinctive buzzing of a gadfly. But it was tiresome, nevertheless. Even the children could hardly stand it and they avoided her whenever possible. As for Tõnu himself, he could do nothing better than clench his teeth and keep silent.

But come to think of it all now, she did not do it out of spite, — on the contrary, she meant it for the good of others, she wanted to be useful to her family. And perhaps that competent midwife had been right when she said that ever since the first time, when she had been long in labour and it had cost them the life of their first-born son, Leenu had been suffering from an injury inflicted on her by an evil eye during pregnancy.

Another wave of deep sorrow overwhelms Tõnu and a widower's bitter loneliness fills his bosom. In his grief he bends his heavy head still lower and his murmuring lips make a confession to the dusty floor at his feet — all that went to the grave with Leenu had been his very own, had really belonged to him, in spite of everything.

Prillup is still sitting there when the noisy threesome comes pattering into the house. Their coarse linen shirts are wet, their feet are muddy, and water trickles down their legs. Laughing and nudging one another, they talk about the great event and what they look like now, taking hardly any notice of the father of the family to whom such things are alien, and they go on chattering until Mari puts on her skirt and tells the children to go and dress. Then she begins to comb her tangled hair in front of a tiny looking-glass.

Something has suddenly changed, thinks Tõnu over by the window.

When these three came romping in like three mischievous colts, or rather like a filly with two foals, something bright burst into the room and into his bosom — something that drove out what had been there before.

It's better so — yes, it's better so, to tell the truth — far better.

And this need never be exchanged for anything else — why should it? That's settled then — once and for all.

This must not change — must not, and Prillup's gaze slowly moves up and down the figure of Mari, who is combing her hair. No, it must not change. It must not!

Suddenly he jumps to his feet and smiling approaches her, who has taken Leenu's place. He would like to say something or do something, but he is at a loss and only pokes her in the neck with his finger and clicks his tongue against his palate, like the proud owner of a fine-looking colt when he pats it lovingly.

CHAPTER SEVEN

But these sudden attacks do not leave him for long.

As one goes, another comes.

The baron's words are like a poisonous bug that now lives in the cottager's bosom.

It dies, but comes to life again. Sometimes it is dead by day, and by night it revives, sometimes the other way about.

And every time it comes to life again it is more active than before, and the fever that arises is eating out his heart.

It would not be right or proper for Tõnu to make fun of Yaan for always turning the conversation to his favourite theme: Tõnu himself is past-master of the same skill now. There is one difference, however. If Yaan talks to all and sundry about what lies nearest to his heart, then Tõnu's speeches are always addressed to one and the same listener, and so much oftener must that one lend an ear to his endless arguments.

Tõnu gives no respite, for none is given him.

He is like a slave-driver, because his master drives him like a slave.

One day he prays that she had more wisdom, on the next he wishes she were more of a fool.

But Mari is neither wise nor foolish, and so his perpetual harping gets him nowhere.

Mari is a heavy sleeper and she does not like to get up early. She yawns and stretches herself and is indignant because the summer nights are so short.

"You'd like to sleep till ten o'clock, I daresay."

"I would."

"Or even till noon?"

"Sometimes."

"Well, there are women who can sleep as long as they like."

Yawning, Mari stretches herself so that tears are squeezed out of her eyes. "I suppose there are."

"And they are not all born to it, either."

"I suppose so."

"One comes by it this way, another that way."

"As always."

"And some people don't know when luck knocks at their door."

"No doubt," says Mari with a long drawn-out yawn.

"Mistress Kuru might sleep till midday, if she wanted to, and in another year or two she needn't get up till evening."

"What a pity I'm not Yaan's wife," laughs Mari and, getting over her drowsiness at last, she jumps out of bed.

In summer the peasants must toil from dawn to dusk.

Mari works by fits and starts: sometimes she is very diligent, but sometimes she does not feel like doing anything. At such times she is weighed by boredom, her eyes shine with unshed tears, nor is she ashamed to take a long rest in the middle of the day. And it is evident that the minor household chores are also done haphazardly.

But one way or another, Tõnu always contrives to take advantage of these lapses in his young wife's housekeeping.

"Yes, Mari my dear, work is hard, — very hard for some people. But it's not their fault that they have to work so hard. They're not born to hard work, the Creator simply didn't make them that way. I've always observed and said that there are people of two kinds in this world — peasants and gentle folk, and they're not made of the same flesh. And the flesh on your bones, Mari, is the flesh of a lady."

"All right then, I'll lie on my back and stare at the ceiling, otherwise I should be sinning against the laws of the Lord."

"Well — and why not? You could very well do that. If you would only take notice whither the finger of God is pointing."

"Some finger, isn't it? — that is pointing to a second old man for me."

The way Mari raises her eyebrows is enough to make Tõnu stop — as if the auger had struck metal. He is speechless, his brain is numb, and sometimes he must turn his head to avoid meeting her piercing glance, for she seems to see right through him.

There are days of misgiving, followed by days of hope, and in between there are days when Prillup turns his steps towards the manor-house to lay his "no" before the baron and be done with the whole business once and for all. But he always turns back halfway. Once he even goes as far as the door. And whenever he catches sight of the old man abroad, and he fears that a private talk might ensue, Prillup turns aside at the last moment to avoid a confrontation. He waits eagerly to be summoned, but at the same time he fears lest he might be summoned. And he is grateful that the baron is so patient with him. At times he hopes that the matter has been forgotten, and also fears lest it has been forgotten. And when at last they happen to meet, Tõnu is frightened, but at the same time he feels relief.

He chances upon the old gentleman in the meadow, just below his own cottage. He stops, and his heart misses a beat, as if he had come accidentally upon a sleeping bear in its den. Their eyes meet and glance aside at once; for a moment both are speechless.

Kremer has sunk deep into the haycock where he is half reclining, his cap on his knee, while the wind plays with his mighty whiskers.

"Well, Prillup, you haven't shown up for a long time."

Only now does Tõnu begin to fumble with the hat on his head. He pulls it off, but the hand that holds it lingers to scratch the back of the head, as if he hoped that the exchange of words would be brief.

"I had nothing to say to Herr Kremer."

"So you don't want to become a business man?"

"A business man? I might consider it, but does the baron really mean it?"

"What the deuce!" Herr von Kremer sits up in his nest of hay. "So you think I talked to you just for the fun of it?"

"No, I didn't take it that way, of course. Well, I must say, we've talked it over a bit, but it's not for me to decide, as you know."

"So it's M a r i who is against it?"

"That's about the way it is."

The baron dons his cap and grasps his stick. Both men look around simultaneously to see if anybody is within earshot.

"What's she afraid of? Gossip or what?"

"Yes — that too, no doubt."

"And what else?"

Tõnu shuffles his feet. "Who knows? She's whimsical. I can't fathom her."

The pupils of Herr Kremer's large bulging eyes under their bushy brows dilate and there is something in his expression now that was not there before. Tõnu's hand, still holding the big home-made straw hat at the back of his head, slips down over his shoulder and slides down his chest.

"Look here, Prillup, you are not speaking the truth. I know that Mari agrees — but it's you who's against it —"

"So the baron knows —"

"Yes, I know. Mari's no fool. She would like to live and she would know how to live, she's got just that kind of face. But it's you who won't let her, you grudge her a better life."

Prillup is silent, his mouth has dropped open, he turns his eyes searchingly, his left hand rubbing his hip: he is confronted by something new.

"Maybe — maybe — I do grudge it to her — a bit, but she has said nothing about it, not a single word, not even in that direction."

"Well — well! You are a clever one!" Herr Kremer stands up. "So you think a woman will come and ask you, when she sees you are dead set against it. Very clever of you, indeed!"

He turns his back on his adversary and makes as if to walk off, though his steps lag. Over his shoulder he mumbles: "It's every man's own business how he settles his affairs." And Prillup sees that his neck has turned an angry red.

And not only Ulrich von Kremer's neck is red, his whole face is red, and his eyes seem to be red hot too, for he cannot see clearly. He thinks he feels a stitch or two in the region of his heart. Where the unsound valve exists. But it is not anger that races through his veins — as Prillup thinks, it is only a wave of deep dissatisfaction with himself, the bitter essence of which is: *Ich hätte mich mit dem Kerl nicht einlassen sollen!**

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* I should never have tied myself with that fellow. *(German.)*

But then it turns out that Herr von Kremer has no grounds for self-reproach yet. Prillup doesn't let him go — evidently the deal is not yet broken.

"Let the master not be offended," — Prillup's hand with the hat is at the back of his head again — "what I wanted to say is that no decision has been made on our side, it's not half settled yet. Could the baron allow us a little more time to talk it over?"

Kremer's face is red no longer. He half turns his barrel of a body towards the cottager, vehemently moving both eyebrows and whiskers up and down, and his harsh voice has regained its smoothness.

"Take your time, Prillup."

"Well, yes — well yes — the baron didn't set any time limit, of course, he's very patient. But it can't be helped — everything has its snags, naturally. Everything might have been shipshape already" — here Prillup's mouth twists into a smile, even his eyes try to help to apologize, "if the baron had been, so-to-say, younger. As it is she is saddled with one old man already —"

"Did she say that?" Kremer's body turns another degree towards Tõnu.

"Not exactly that — she wouldn't dare. Being a baron makes a difference, of course. But it can easily be imagined — her being so young. A young person like that can't understand all at once, when you talk to her about such things. She's just like a child —"

"How young is she then?"

"She'll be twenty-one in the middle of August, I'm told. But that's not the point. Those people from that Forest parish — I know them because I used to work there as a farm-hand — they don't really grow up till their brows are deeply furrowed and crow's feet appear round the eyes, and some remain unfledged till the grave."

"In that case I'll have a long time to wait!"

"Well — no — master, not all of them are like that, though. Some see the light when they are still young and are capable of learning. I know such from that parish, too, and my Mari isn't — as the baron himself said —"

Here the old gentleman, who does not believe a word of Tõnu's long harangue, puts an abrupt end to the interview.

"Let's leave it at that, and you'll come another time and bring me word."

And as he turns on his heel and lifts his stick, he adds: "You can tell her that she needn't worry about the gossip if she herself can hold her tongue, and you too, Prillup."

And then after taking a few steps: "She might drop in some evening herself and tell me."

Tõnu watched him pass his left hand over his chest, side and back, as if he were brushing something off. And then, rowing himself along with his stick, he soon disappears in the shrubbery.

From that day on Tõnu Prillup changed his tactics: no round-about methods now, but always straight to the point. He didn't press too hard, though, nor did he demand or coax — that would not have seemed fair, although sometimes he might have mustered the courage. But he was tireless in his efforts to make her fall in with his plan, ever trying to show her the bright side of the project, painting it in beautiful colours, and always ending with the same query: "Well, Mari my dear, how do you feel about it?" And as he always called her "dear Mari" now and wished to make it all more tempting to her, he began to shorten the period of time that must elapse before that troublesome milk-delivering business should land them at their glorious destination.

He surmised that five, perhaps six years, or seven at the most, would suffice for saving up enough money to buy a small farm, to start with; they needn't set their sights on an estate at first. That would make things easier at the beginning, though in the long run it would require more time to reach the ultimate goal. In his meditations concerning the near goal, Tõnu wavered only in matters of secondary importance: whether he should purchase an ordinary peasant farm, or a farm with a flour-mill, or with salable timber, or one where a shop could be set up — but he always remained faithful to the fruitful soil, he never lost sight of green fields and lush meadows, for he wanted to stand firmly on his o w n land, like Yaan Kuru, whose words he was fond of repeating.

Mari stood motionless like a dog whose flea-bites are being scratched. She said neither yes or no, and as time went on she hardly took the trouble to poke fun at him and his arguments. Nothing disturbed her peace of mind, she only smiled absent-mindedly or looked aside, as was her habit,

sometimes scratching behind the ear, sometimes breaking the silence by humming a nameless little tune. When a woodpecker hammers at the trunk of a tree, it soon finds out where the hollows are, thought Tõnu, but I keep on tapping from day to day and get no answer. He couldn't make it out, simply because he forgot that not every tree gave the woodpecker a positive answer either. Tõnu was getting dubious of the outcome, just like the lord of the manor himself, and he was even more doubtful now since he had heard that the other man also doubted.

Then one day something happened which seemed to indicate that Prillup's tree did have a hollow somewhere.

They were sitting near the stake fence, where Mari was boiling new potatoes for supper and Tõnu was honing the blade of a scythe. He had been speaking his piece again, and had just planted his foot on the rich black soil of a big farm. Taking for granted that Mari was homesick, he ended his tale this time by saying: "And we'd go to the Forest parish, near your old home at Ruisu — that's where we'd go. What would you say to that, Mari, my dear?"

"But why not to town?" asked Mari and looked absently at the fire.

"To town —? What would we —?"

"There are all kinds of people there and so many nice things."

Only a second later was the full significance of Mari's statement revealed to her husband. His mouth dropped open, the scythe slid to the ground, his right hand was holding the knife rigidly upright on his knee.

And like a flash he recalled a little episode, an observation he had made, that now helped him to follow the trend of Mari's thoughts.

Mari had been to town for the first time in her life (which was nothing out of the ordinary for those backwoods women), when they went shopping there together in preparation for the wedding. She had been in the seventh heaven, in quite another world, where she was discovering something new at every step. It was somewhat awkward, too, her stopping to stare so often; she got lost in the crowd several times and Tõnu had to look for her as for a lost child. And in the end, when Tõnu went on some business where the bride's presence was not needed, she had strayed off again and come back to the cart a couple of hours later. The time had passed so quickly while she was looking at all "the people and things". And her cheeks were flushed with pleasure.

She had been serious and thoughtful on the way and said very little, but when she got home, she was bursting with news, enough for many, many days. And even now she recalled little episodes to which the children pricked their ears and listened open-mouthed. Mari had seen and heard more in town during one hour than Tõnu had in his whole lifetime, although he made several trips to town every year.

So it's to town she's anxious to go.

As for Tõnu himself, there was nothing he longed for less than that. He always felt so superfluous in town, the closeness seemed to strangle him, and he got indignant at the people who seemed to have all plotted together to push and jostle him and block his way. He thanked God every time he got away from there and wondered how people could stand such a life. And worst of all, everything had to be bought, the soil yielded nothing, and every bite you ate had to be paid for in money. The fear of town life was seated deep in him. — But why weigh such possibilities so early! Time enough till the day arrived, when they would have to make the final decision. By that time his partner will have matured, and if she got her own way — well, people lived in towns as well as in the country. The tree-trunk had answered the woodpecker, who thought that now he knew where lay the way to the juicy worms — and for the present that was the main thing. So he replied to his wife:

"Well — we might go to town — why not?"

And he said no more.

Their conversation was cut short by an invisible knife.

And not only for today; he dared not broach the subject again for many days.

With his hand he made a gesture as much as to say that there was still lots of time. And with that he left his seat and went towards the threshing-shed, as if he had something urgent to attend to in there.

Hardly could the man have said what was happening to him, but he suddenly felt that now he was confronted by the question of yes or no more seriously than ever before. In fact he stood face to face with the silliest of silly questions — whether he should become Yaan Kuru or remain Tõnu Prillup. But now, when his partner in the deal seemed willing to pay her share of the price, misgivings took hold of him again: what if he was making a bad bargain? Like a hare in a net, he was harassed by a

childish apprehension: how could he give one of his three to another? He felt that he harboured some grudge against the generous old man as the latter had hinted to him in vexation.

In this troubled state of mind Tõnu lost his appetite, and his night's sleep was restless, until he felt that he must kneel down and pray to God for help and advice. But that over-burdened confidant was probably busy with the affairs of some other poor cottager, and Tõnu waited in vain for an answer. Then he made up his mind to see a fortune-teller.

She lived in the village of Tapu and responded at once. By way of introduction they talked about life in general on either side of the river, while she stuffed her enormous nose with snuff, and not a single word did Tõnu say about his trouble: but as soon as she had laid out her cards, she read from them as from a book, that a good bit of luck awaited him — only he must be sharp lest he should miss it. There were obstacles in the way, she warned, and these he must know how to overcome. And in the end the dirty, smelly cards pronounced briefly and secretively: who gives naught, takes naught. The man from across the river must remember: who gives naught, takes naught.

These mysterious words brought Tõnu to his feet.

He took both her hands in his as he thanked her, promising to add to the fee in autumn, and left.

Who gives naught, takes naught — who gives naught, takes naught!

It was a good hour's walk across the marsh from Sutsu's place to Prillup's cottage, but Tõnu covered the distance in half the usual time. Fear winged his feet as he fled — fear that the fortune-teller was after him to take something back from the revelation she had made to him. When he reached the river and was about to step on the foot-bridge, he actually looked back towards Sutsu and chuckled when he saw nobody. And from the opposite bank he set off again at full speed with the water squirting under foot, — hardly knowing why he was in such a hurry, except that he wanted to have more time at home that Sunday evening for putting his plans in shape. Only when he reached the slope near his own village, where he put on his raw-hide sandals again (they needn't know at home that he had come from the marsh), did Tõnu slacken his pace. Going up the slope he felt his knees getting weak and his head was in a mist.

He found his young wife lying prone on the grass in the yard, with

three open books under her nose. Mari had a queer habit of reading several books simultaneously, a passage from one, then from another. She insisted that nothing got mixed up and that she understood the contents perfectly. She performed her minor household duties on the same principle: starting something here and leaving off there. She considered it far more rational, and said it was more convenient, too. Where there is a will there is a way, and no amount of laughing and teasing had any effect on her. Mari's literary fund consisted of a dozen greasy novels and song-books, which she had brought with her from her father's home, and she kept reading and re-reading them goodness knows how many times, for Prillup's stock of literature was limited to a few religious books and a calendar to which nothing new had been added.

At Tõnu's approach the reader raised her eyes for a moment from the book she was reading, but she only got as far as his knees, then she went on reading again undisturbed. She was never in the habit of inquiring where he had been. He stretched himself on the grass by her side and began to fill his pipe. He was glad that she took so little notice of him: it gave him time to collect his thoughts and steady his voice — for something still kept jumping in his throat.

"Where have the children gone?" he inquired tentatively after a time.

"To Pajusi, I suppose," said Mari and changed over to another book.

"Did you quarrel?"

"No, I just wanted to read."

Tõnu pulled at his pipe with mighty puffs. The evening sky cast a rosy hue over the yard, making Mari's hair and the white pages of her book glow softly.

"We didn't finish our talk" — began Tõnu and laid his hand on her waist.

Mari read on, she seemed to have come upon something very interesting and, pushing her hand back unconsciously, she shifted Tõnu's as if the weight of it caused her discomfort. But she had heard what he said and when she reached the end of the exciting episode, she said casually: "What talk?"

"Don't you remember? You were all for going to live in town. You thought that when we got on a little with the milk-carrying business, we might move to town. — — Well, I had to stop and think a little, the idea

was rather new — you see — we've always been so close to the soil and work in the field has become second nature to us. But — when I had considered the pros and cons — why, a town's as good a place to live in as any other. No worry about the cattle, or the haymaking, or the corn harvest. Everything's ready and handy. All you do is to buy, and eat, and live like the gentle folk. You see, we could take a couple of the bigger houses, and if we felt like it, we could open a store, or some other kind of business. And if we don't want to be bothered with things like that, we could just let the money grow. Well, well! You'll sure have lots of time then to go and look at all those people and things! What do you say to that, Mari my dear?"

Mari read several lines in her book before she answered, without raising her eyes: "Go ahead and take over the milk-carrying, when Yaan buys an estate."

"When Yaan buys —?" Prillup pulled up his long legs with a jerk, his lips curled into a smile. "Don't be funny — who'd give me that milk-carrying then? Don't you see that the old man is annoyed already because his offer wasn't accepted as readily as he expected? He makes a generous offer, and now he has to wait and bargain like a fool. Why can't you go and put an end to the whole thing —?" he said softly with a tinge of reproach, letting the words slide gently into his thick beard.

"The end has come if you will only keep your mouth shut."

"But — you — don't you want to?"

"No!"

Prillup's brownish eyes closed for an instant as if he had been struck a blow on the head. He took the pipe out of his mouth and put it back, then took it out once more and put it back again.

"But you promised — you said —"

"I said I'd be glad to live in town, if I could."

"If you could — — but you could if — —"

The reader turned a page, not a muscle in her face moved, but the words died on Tõnu's lips, the veins in his neck began to swell and a stifled sound came from his throat as if he were choking. He lay motionless like a log for some time, then got up and sauntered towards the cottage. To Mari it seemed that his knees sagged as he walked.

CHAPTER EIGHT

In his day the late Aabram Prillup had been of two minds as to whom he should pray to on economical issues: to the heavenly Father or to the Devil. In order to be on the safe side his son asked advice of both dignitaries, but was no better off than before. The former wrapped himself in a cloud of silence which probably meant that Tõnu's complaint had no place on his files, while the latter spoke far too ambiguously through the medium of Triinu Sutsu's smelly cards, which only said: don't let your luck evade you, don't let obstacles stand in your way. All very well, but how was it to be done? Tõnu wished that the powers of heaven and hell, who were supposed to guide the actions of men, would be more explicit and take a human being's spiritual limitations into consideration. Only the words about giving and taking were not so obscure. Of course, the son of Aabram was ready to give. But what was he to do if the gift itself refused to be given, if her stubborness was no longer the issue, and decision was adamant? What was he to do now? What the deuce was he to hold on to, or what should he endeavor to avoid?

Once more Prillup decided that it was hopeless, that he had better drop the whole thing. But having reached that stage, he was sure to dig up again what he had buried the day before, and breathe hope into the nostrils of what had seemed hopeless. It would all be quite easy if the fortune promised by Sutsu was going to be small. But it might turn out to be a whole lot, at least as much as Tõnu himself expected, or it might even prove to be much, much greater. And that was something worth fighting for, and he should not spare himself, nor grudge time or energy, sleep or

appetite to win it. He may still be able to solve the problem, or put his hand on the right lever, or perchance some stroke of good luck might point out the right way to him.

But alas, during the days that followed there was little evidence that he was making any headway at all.

Tõnu found a pretext to send his wife to town, hoping that the fresh charms of town life would break her obstinacy, so that she would more readily fall in with his plans. She went to town by train and spent a whole day amid it charms and pleasures. But she came home not half so excited about town life as on the first occasion and resolutely declared that it was empty and useless, and besides the heat was annoying.

Then Tõnu tried his luck with bribes of money. He promised to give his wife all the profits which he, as a renter of the Mäeküla dairy, would get on the sale of calves, and she could spend the money as she pleased, from the very first day. He also promised to let her have a definite share of the profits from the sale of every pound of butter, and he even hinted that "the other one" would not be mean in money matters either, he was bound to add something from time to time.

But Mari only smiled with a flash of her distant teeth, and said, "How generous you are, both of you."

There were occasions when Prillup had a mind to advise the baron to take the whole matter into his own hands and give her a piece of fatherly advice: perhaps a baron's word would have more impact than a peasant's. But this alternative also had its drawbacks: Mari might make some saucy reply and spoil everything.

And then one day before noon the Mäeküla housekeeper sent word that Mari was to go and scrub the floors, and since the old gentleman had not gone to Särgvere that day, for Tõnu had seen him out walking in the morning, it was possible that the housekeeper's summons had been prompted by the baron's wish to talk to Mari in private. But it might be pure coincidence. And so Prillup had to accept the situation which he had no power to change, and hope for the best, praying that all would go well.

But Mari answered the messenger with the most shameful impertinence. "No, I won't go, let them summon the cowherd's wife, it was formerly her job and she needs the earnings more than I do."

At the gate Tõnu managed to intercept the messenger and beg her not to repeat what Mari had said, but to tell them at the manor-house that she wasn't at home.

"Heaven help us!" cried Prillup in righteous indignation; and besides another side of the matter had now occurred to him. "Don't you see that he wants you, that he considers you to be his own? He could have called somebody else, the world is full of girls and women, but he wants you, only you! Why can't you respect his wishes, or don't you know who he is and who you are?"

But the wilful Mari wouldn't budge. She burst out laughing when she saw him clasp his hands in helpless perplexity, and between peals of laughter she managed to say, "No, I can't — I can't! I respect myself — hasn't that ever dawned on you?" Mari seldom laughed, and then only soberly. He had never seen her laugh so mischievously before.

Now Prillup's mind was a blank, a perfect blank. As if he had a lifeless block of wood instead of a head on his shoulders. He was in a daze, and when walking, he felt as though his feet were on the edge of a steep slope and his next step would land him in a pit. In his bewilderment he felt that he could hardly control the movements of his hands. He had to make a conscious effort to steer his pitchfork in the right direction when he was loading clover in the field. Evenings, when he lay down dead tired, his limbs were numb and the bed under him seemed to rock like a boat on the waves.

And in this helpless state he again turned to the powers above, only half conscious of what he was doing.

He began to read the Bible and ordered the children to fold their hands at table. After church he went to prayer-meeting and insisted that his wife should go to Holy Communion with him, although it was barely three months since they had been there after the wedding. His former indifference to religion was gone, and he went so far as to give his wife to understand that she must do her share in living the life of a true Christian. The children had to recite the Catechism and were not allowed to go to bed without saying the Lord's Prayer. And he demanded the fulfilment of these orders as if he himself had always held them in high esteem.

These indirect steps towards holiness soon led him to desire direct

communion with God on matters of the greatest importance to himself. And he was eager to begin. It was likely that his impatience drove him to approach the heavenly Father before his turn came and he was compelled to wait a long time. And this long wait again caused him to lean towards the Powers of Darkness.

After church, one Sunday, Prillup chanced to meet the Sutsu woman on the path leading from the church door to the gate. He sent Mari off to buy some buns at the store, and after a knowing glance and a hand-shake, he led Triinu aside from the crowd. He wanted to know if she had any remedy for a wife who opposed her husband in certain matters — it did not matter what kind — to make her submissive, to make her sensible.

Still hale and hearty in spite of her age, Mother Sutsu was a quiet and respectable woman, neatly dressed in black. Reflected in her motherly eyes was tolerance and friendship towards her neighbours, and planted between those motherly eyes was a big heavy nose, wide and fleshy towards the tip, which stuck outward, but not upward, and was darkish in colour from the constant use of snuff. And as she replenished it from a little shiny box, it darkened still more while she listened to Prillup's troubles. The soothsayer wore a round liver-coloured cap trimmed with lace, and it was set rather far back on the head without giving her an affected air, though; for the fringe of silver-grey hair and the kind expression on her face outshone all else.

Of course she knew such a remedy. To be sure, for every evil there was a cure, she said, and in some cases there were several cures. And very sensibly, without displaying any unwanted curiosity as to the nature of Tõnu's trouble, she began to instruct him after she had peered for a moment at the weather-cock on the church steeple: Friend Prillup was to cut of a lock of his wife's hair secretly on Bartholomeus' Night; he was to take some wax from her right ear, and some grime from under the nail of the big toe of her left foot — all without her knowledge. Or some other night might do at a pinch. All this loot he was to bring to her at Sutsu, and she would add some ingredients of her own and say the necessary words. He was then to wear the amulet in a little bag under his shirt until the cure gradually began to work.

But Bartholomeus' Day was too far off to suit Prillup, this affair was rather urgent, he insisted.

In that case it could be done on a Thursday night before a full moon. Of course Bartholomeus' Night was more effective, but perhaps she could add something else to make up for that. The farewells were said in haste, for a girl with tear-stained eyes was making her way between the graves of the nobility in the direction of Mother Sutsu. Evidently the corner of the graveyard behind the chapel, where they were standing, had on previous occasions served as a retreat for secret consultations with the most famous fortune-teller of the parish.

It was an easy matter for Tōnu to cut a lock of hair from his wife's head, for she was a heavy sleeper; nor did the nail-grime cause him much trouble. But when it came to taking some ear-wax — here he was up against it. For some time there was no wax in Mari's ears, for she washed her ears regularly. Then, when some wax appeared in her left ear, there was none in the right, and when at last there was some in the right ear, the tickling of the straw woke her up before he succeeded in getting any, or the young wife happened to be sleeping on her right side just at that very moment. So he watched and waited in vain. He gave it up when one night Mari had awakened and struck him, saying angrily, "Why can't you leave my ears alone?"

In the end he was obliged to go to Sutsu's without any ear-wax.

The wax was lacking and the lock of hair was not cut on Bartholomeus' Night, so the fortune-teller was doubtful whether she could guarantee success, though she would try to find substitutes for the missing ingredients. But she hoped for the best, cut the hair up finely, mixed it with the nail-grime and other mysterious substances, rolled it all into a ball, which had no definite colour or smell. And of the string of words she muttered, Prillup caught only the tail end: "Sick-a-nick-a-lick-a-lock-a-vonda-daa."

Until quite lately Prillup had been absolutely immune to witchcraft — and here he was now, leaving the Sutsu cottage with that smelly pellet in his bosom.

With the amulet under his pillow, he could now sleep at night, for fresh hope of success acted like morphine on his nerves. But when long days passed and Mari's stubborness still showed no signs of ebbing and all his attempts to touch her to the core had failed, then his long nights of waking returned: again the bed was like a rolling boat under him and he felt his feet slipping over the edge of a grave.

Tõnu had to make haste, there was no time to lose. Such a man as von Kremer would not let himself be made a fool of. But everything has its limits, and soon he may no longer want what he covets now. And great was Prillup's alarm when he happened to meet the old gentleman one day in the hazel grove behind the barn, and the latter passed him, solemn and speechless, acknowledging Tõnu's salutation only with a slight upward movement of his nose.

Now, when he was threatened by the possibility of losing everything, Tõnu's dream castle rose before his eyes more alluringly. The milk-carrying business would be only the gateway. To take money by the handful, to wallow in money! So far the largest sum he had ever held in his shaking hand was the money he paid out for a skinny heifer or an old horse; usually it was only copecks that he counted and rarely the odd rouble. And the knowledge that other people would hear of his prosperity! To be able to speak casually of hundreds, soon it would be thousands, so that other people would hear him. To eat fat pork, when others had only salt sprats to chew. And to see that he was envied! And beyond the gateway — his dream castle rising in splendor: he would no longer be the slave, he would be the slave-driver; not the oppressed, but the oppressor; he would not be frightened by the cock's crow at dawn, but would have the pleasure of seeing others intimidated and watch them rise. And many would rise in his honour to serve him. Property! Property that can be measured in length, breadth and height, and all legal, with a document of title in black and white — it would all belong to him, and people would be envious of his possessions, for ever his own, for ever and ever his own! And all the voices of heaven and earth sang the words into his ear: "My Own."

He sat down under a bush, took the magic charm from his bosom and looked at it. Quick! Be quick! Do something! But the ball was dry and the remedy sapless. And all at once doubt stung him like a wasp: the power might have faded and died!

It seemed to him as if an ice-cold hand had passed over his body. Cold sweat oozed from every pore in his skin and in his hazy mind a question began to take shape: what will happen to him t h e n — who will help him t h e n? For He who is more powerful than any other, had not heeded Tõnu's prayers; He who is supposed to help a man in his extremity, had failed him.

But barely had his heavy head sunk down on the moss when he suddenly remembered a piece of long-forgotten advice.

He recalled his maternal grandfather sitting on a stump in the yard in his white linen shirt, fastened with on old-fashioned round brooch. The old grey head was nearly a hundred, with a snow-white beard that encircled his square jaw. He was talkative and jolly, and tenderness shone from his faded eyes, the tenderness that had once charmed three wives, all of whom he had survived. He played with the children, and when he sowed grains of wisdom in between their games and frolicks, the advice that he most often repeated to them was that on no pretext were they to trouble the heavenly Father with their prayers. People's complaints and desires should not be addressed to Him, because He had more important matters to attend to: to roll the sun and moon along their paths, to light the stars, make the weather, and replace the worn-out moon with a new one every four weeks. Nor would His son have time to listen to people's complaints; for he must watch, day and night, and warn people against wars and plagues, and also keep the Devil tethered. And the Holy Ghost's occupation was to tender a word of good advice to them both.

But the one who listened to people's groans and graciously answered their prayers was the Virgin Mary, and only the Virgin Mary. If anybody called to Mary in his trouble, he did not call in vain. It was said that with her help a baron's doom was once sealed, not to speak of a certain bailiff and steward who were suddenly summoned to the hot regions below. Very many prayers were never answered because very often people did not know to whom to pray.

None of the older people had believed the old man, not even his own daughters. At church, at prayer-meetings and at Confirmation they were taught a different kind of religion. And Tõnu had also been one to make fun of the old man's belief in the Virgin, after a talk with his mother.

But now — now! Tõnu sprang to his feet and hurried home. There he went stealthily into the barn and knelt down between his empty bins and half empty sacks, and raised his voice in despair towards the grey cobwebs hanging from the dusty rafters.

From the depth of his soul he prayed to the Virgin Mary. Did she not see that Tõnu's cause was right? All that he asked for was that he might

live better; for had he not suffered enough from the evils of life? If all was well with Tõnu, then all would be well with Mari, too, and also with their children, after them. They must both bend their will, for it is known that the gentry will never give anything for nothing. So let the Virgin Mary enlighten Mari's childish mind and make her see what profit lay therein, and let it happen that Mari should no longer grudge to pay her share of the price. Let her have today and tomorrow and the day after to think it over, but then let her come and say, 'I understand, I am ready'.

And Tõnu finished his prayer with a fervent pledge to remain a true servant to the Virgin Mary till the end of his days.

But the prayer offering had so taxed his strength that now his knees refused to obey. With a palpitating heart he let his head sink down on to the edge of a flour bin, where he let the tears flow freely.

When at last he was himself again and rose to his feet, a great bliss surged through him, as though he had been cleansed, and he found that he had spoken well. A clear yes or no would soon show the value of his grandfather's advice, and the term of three days that he had set saved him endless worry. The heavenly helper should clearly see that his prayer was based on righteousness. Tõnu was not imposing himself on anybody, his hand was not reaching out for somebody else's bread or shelter, for in the long run it made no difference whether Yaan Kuru became a landowner a year sooner or a year later.

The tension of those three days gripped him like a vise. He was all eyes and ears. He studied every line on his wife's face, he weighed every sound that her lips uttered, his eyes followed her every gesture; and in every toss or turn of her head he thought he saw the expected change coming. When she woke up in the morning, or when they met again for the midday meal, or when Mari approached him with some question — Tõnu's heart missed a beat every time — "now" he thought. During those three days he was very silent, trying to hide everything that might give him away. He only smiled to Mari warmly and tenderly. This was a Tõnu she had never seen before, even during the first days of their marriage he had not been so good to her.

To Tõnu it seemed that Mari was exceptionally quiet — quiet, serious and thoughtful, especially on the third and last day. Tõnu interpreted this as a good omen for himself — just so had he pictured to himself that

she would soften and bend to his will. And after supper he solemnly took his pipe and sat down in his "armchair" to wait. It was a wicker chair he himself had woven on winter evenings and padded the seat with a piece of felt. He was in the habit of sitting in his armchair only on Sundays.

But Mari came in from the barn or the shed, chatted a little with the children in the kitchen, and the moment she stepped into the bed-chamber she began to unfasten hooks and buttons with quick fingers. Yawning with relish, she sank down on the bed with a sigh of relief.

"There'll be a thunderstorm tonight, I feel it in the air," she said.

Tõnu sat speechless.

"Our rye is ripe."

Not a muscle did he move.

Now she lay silent. A few abortive snores escaped from the sleeper's lips, and shortly the regular breathing of young healthy lungs was heard.

The watcher in his ceremonial chair let the cold pipe slide down his breast into his lap. The outline of his figure faded into the gathering dusk that filled the room.

Outside the thunder was rolling already, the smell of damp earth and rain seeped in through the window, and blue streaks of lightning split the darkness.

In the light of those bright flashes the deep eye-sockets of the watcher looked dark and fathomless.

CHAPTER NINE

The nights grew longer, but little good that did to Tõnu Prillup because he slept badly. Sleep eluded him, and when his eyes closed for a time, he was at once awakened by terrifying dreams. He had formerly slept like a log, but now, Mari said time and again, that he moaned and even talked in his sleep. Once he had been on the verge of weeping, and another time he had tried to sing a song.

Most often his dreams were so fleeting that the dreamer could not remember anything in the morning, except for the feeling that he had somehow been in distress. And if his memory did retain something of what he had dreamt, it usually made no sense and was soon forgotten.

But one night he had a dream that he remembered long, nor was it a nightmare this time. A young seal climbed over the foot of the bed and sat down on top of Tõnu. It squatted there, staring at him, its quaint face wreathed in a friendly smile.

"Why are you staring at me?" asked Tõnu, stroking its head and cheek which were as soft as a colt's lips.

By the looks of it, the animal could surely speak.

"I want to see what kind of man you are," it said clearly, even though in a thick oily voice.

"What's the matter with me?"

"The matter —?" said the seal twisting its body. "Some man you are, who can't make his wife obey him!"

"Well — what should I do, in your opinion?"

"Give it to her good and hard, dear brother, good and hard."

The seal tweaked Tõnu's nose with one paw, patted the young wife's cheek with the other, and grinning good-naturedly it jumped off the bed.

"Where are you off to now?"

"Me?" it said, now far away and invisible. "I just roam around the world and give nincompoops a bit of advice."

Tõnu laughed when he woke up: the look in the seal's eyes, the speaking mouth, everything it had said and done were inimitably strange; and still Tõnu had the impression that he had had an encounter with a real person.

And it was a person he did not soon forget, neither the image nor the words, and over and over again it rose before his eyes and repeated its foolish story.

And after a while the story did not seem so ridiculous, and the words had seemingly not been spoken by a seal. Tõnu bristled in anger against his wife, for the advice proved to be sensible — so sensible that it might have matured in his own brain.

His first attempts came to nothing: his wife's eyes were so clear and bright when she looked at him that a lump stuck in his throat. But he knew the remedy. And when he came home one evening from the store by the church with his weekly supply of tobacco, he was well armoured against those bright eyes.

Now he knew how to tackle her.

If he, poor man, had only known that he would be saddled with such a slattern! What dirt and disorder in the house, what carelessness! Their bit of cream turns rancid, the hens lay nobody knows where, the ale cask is mouldy, neither husband nor children ever have a clean shirt to put on — the housewife goes romping on the village green with the boys and girls. Her husband comes home hungry — the padlock hangs on the door, he must go back and look for his wife at the communal swing and call her home!

The young wife looks at him, sees that he is drunk, and is silent.

He goes on ranting: "I've shut my eyes to all the carelessness, I've suffered in silence where another man would have lost patience long ago. I haven't said a word about the yard where the rubbish is knee-deep, nor about the cow that's caked with manure, nor the mouldy ale cask that's not been scalded for goodness knows how long."

He drinks a mouthful of water from the dipper and spits it on the floor: "Stale hogwash!"

"But she'd better look out — the longest rope has an end, and there's an end to Tõnu's patience. And then it may happen that the rope will swing and swish with a vengeance. If only she were a woman who tried to please her husband, or tried to see his side of a question. Why, she won't even consider the circumstances! That manor-house business, for instance. Just imagine, she doesn't want to! Why? Who knows? No excuse whatever! Only she must have the upper hand — that's it! The losses don't concern her! In the past every skirt in the village belonged to the nobility. The baron took whomever it pleased him to take, and nobody said nay. A bride was the baron's wife before she slept with her husband. And no picking and choosing — a baron's a baron whether he's old or young, good-looking or ugly. But our Mari sticks up her nose — she won't have him — he's too old. She wants a young and handsome general!"

Tõnu stops for a moment, waiting, but Mari is still silent. Her silence rubs him the wrong way.

"And now she's lost her tongue, she's got nothing to say for herself, not even some paltry excuse. If she'd open her mouth we might get to the root of the matter and find out what's eating her! If she'd come and say she fears to commit sin — but it's no mortal sin if the husband consents. We all commit sins, every blooming day of our lives — there's no end to all the sins we commit. And those old barons weren't pagans either who used to claim all the village brides. Or perhaps our lord of the manor is a pagan? No, they all live in the fear of God, much more so than we peasants do. And their pastor is also our pastor. And if it were a sin — do you think God and the pastor would have upheld the law so that one nobleman can have a hundred wives? — Don't try to argue with me — your sharp wits won't help you out!"

Tõnu's mouth feels dry. He takes the ale tankard and drinks deep. Mari is leaning against the bedpost. She passes the back of her hand over her mouth and scratches her nose.

"Or she might have come and said — I am shy of other people. But you needn't start pretending now! Haven't I told you time and again — who'll be the wiser? And you're not foolish children, neither of you. And he's got an apartment in town, too. And if there should be gossip — what

the hell? You owe nothing to anybody. Nobody has anything on you. Anybody with a well-lined purse need never blush. Gossip doesn't hurt him who knows how to take with his two hands. You can spit in any of their faces — and if you tell me who it is — I'll strike the whore dead!"

His fist crashes down on the table with mighty pride. He raises his eyes to see how his words have affected the accused, but the dusk has deepened and he can't see through it.

He goes on scolding and fretting, adding abuse upon insult — for his wife's sake as well as his own, working himself up to a pitch where he can go at her with brutal force. But when he reaches the point where he begins to threaten her, and declares that henceforth his word is law in the house even in this matter; then in the midst of the racket, when he begins to peer through the darkness with his misty eyes, he finds that she is gone. He gropes his way to the half-open door: so his eyes did not deceived him.

He stands motionless, faced by the simple fact that he is powerless, or rather that he cannot use his power to command. He is in doubt — how should he cope with such a situation? It's better so, says his better self, leave it at that. But the other side insists that it would be deplorable weakness to leave it so, and such weakness would spell defeat. And the swig he had taken at the pub near the church as an antidote for weakness now speaks up: Don't give in! Don't you see that she is defying you? What man are you if you can't get the better of your wife? Shifting his weight from one foot to the other, he finally steps over the threshold.

It's much lighter outside, and his eye sweeps the length and breadth of the yard: but she is not there. He looks into the barn, peeps into the threshing-shed, and the cowshed — but all in vain. And as he saunters round the yard he picks up a good stout stick. Perhaps he ought to call her? No! There's no knowing where she might run if she guessed that he was after her.

Before long he reaches the cabbage patch at the far end of the enclosure, and there he sees her. Mari is sitting on a big loaf-shaped stone in the corner by the fence, with a pale milk-white halo round her head, for the moon suddenly peeps out from behind a cloud.

Tõnu steps over the stile, and only then he sees that Mari is not alone. Anni and Yuku are squatting at her feet, listening to her with mouths agape. Evidently she is telling them some ridiculous story that she has

made up — they are forever coaxing her to tell them stories. She has a knack of taking some incident at random about herself or their neighbours, and round this she builds up a story with all kinds of impossible plots.

"Mari, come and tell us another nonsense story, will you?" they would coax. And she invariably gives in to their wheedling, though at other times she has little to say. And she knows how to describe the most ridiculous happenings with such a solemn, serious face that the children scream with laughter and beg for more.

Mari is not alone — he had not foreseen such a predicament, he is not prepared for it. To be sure, he is not ashamed to say anything in the presence of those brats at her feet, but — somehow the situation has changed. And seeing that there are three there instead of one, Tõnu is not so self-assured now as he approaches them.

And when he reaches the stone where they are sitting, he is alarmed by something else: they watched him approaching with a stick and not one of them appears to be intimidated. The big one pauses in her tale, the little ones stop laughing, and all three calmly look at him without moving. In fact there are four pairs of eyes staring at him: the shaggy dog Kaaru is crouching between the boy and girl — the only one who shows any sign of fear. But Kaaru does not run away either, he only sits up and moves his nostrils, keeping his eye on the end of Tõnu's stick. He wags his tail in apology for his distrust.

"Why, you're still up! I thought you were in bed, fast asleep."

Mari's non-committal remark, so casually amiable, finishes Tõnu: the punisher is beaten. He silently wonders why he is standing there, why he is holding a stick in his hand. What excuse can he offer to those four pairs of eyes that are gazing at him, especially to her, whose friendly greeting has so completely disarmed him? Tõnu looks from one to the other, he has nothing to say. He is speechless for a while longer, then takes refuge in a fib:

"See, I came to chase you naughty children to bed. What are you doing out so late? And in the morning you can't get your eyes open. Off to bed with you!"

The group scatters as he swings his stick, and the yard echoes with their shouts and laughter. The dog barks its loudest, trying to seize the end of the stick, and Yuku has mustered enough courage to romp with his father

and push him. The fun is at its highest when their powerful adversary, stumbling on something, falls down prone on the grass with a heavy thud, and so loses the battle.

"I wonder why Father doesn't come and play with us every evening?" says Anni to Yuku when they are in bed that night.

"Silly," yawns Yuku, "he doesn't go to the store for tobacco every evening!"

Yuku is right, such an evening does not occur again. Perhaps their father does not smoke his pipe often enough, so he is not short of tobacco. And when he does buy some after church on a Sunday, he does not romp and frolic with the children, and he has never played war with them before.

Perhaps he is ashamed of himself because he lost the battle? It seems to the children that their father has never been so silent and so aloof as he is now. He appears not to see the other inmates of the cottage, he is disinclined to talk — his lips refuse to form words. They notice that the bags under his eyes hang heavy, that they are tinged with blue. They even speak of these observations to Mari.

Prillup's affairs are in a bad way, it is true. He ought to go to the lord of the manor, but he does not go. He hasn't got the strength, simply hasn't got the strength, his feet won't carry him. He expects to be summoned: in that case he couldn't help going there, he must go somehow. But he is not summoned, and his heart grows heavier; from the half-finished manor-house on the hill something oppressive floats towards him, something his confused brain can hardly define.

His daily work wearies him, he is bored by the compulsory services on the estate as well as by the work he must do on his own strip of field, and the boredom grows into an enervating sickness even at the thought that he is doomed to remain for ever what he is — an eternal drudge, with only salt sprats and a piece of bread — like a drowning man who barely keeps afloat, but cannot reach the shore.

And what had formerly been the essence and kernel of his life, the reason for his existence — his strip of field, his old nag and cow, his plough and harrow, and the roof over his head, though mean and meagre — had all been dear to him; but now all is bleak and empty and he hates it with a hatred that borders on madness. He has a feeling that now he has nothing, that he is nothing. He cannot comprehend why he still moves his

hands and feet, why he continues to toil, why he sees and feels, why his brain still functions.

Nor does he always brood over these thoughts in silence with a face devoid of all expression. There are moments when his irritation suddenly flares out in helpless wrath, without rhyme or reason. Then he brutally kicks the dog, who has done no harm, throws a stone at a hen who is only cackling, beats the horse who is straining its utmost, and strikes his scythe against a stone on purpose. The next moment he is sorry for the violence he has done, but the temptation to spite himself, to egg himself on, is stronger than he.

He lives in a world of twilight, in an alien atmosphere. He seems to be carrying on a secret struggle with a mysterious adversary. Now the ground does not move from under his feet; on the contrary, he feels that he does not touch the ground at all, that there is no ground under his feet. And one very hot day, while cutting the bit of barley on his own strip of field, he suddenly gets the idea that his adversary has seized him from behind and is going to hurl him high up into space, which is unknown to Tõnu, where it is bound to be darker than down here in the mellow light.

Mari, who is cutting barley not far off, watches her husband begin to retreat step by step, as though his eyes beheld some horrible sight. With trembling knees he drags his feet along, while the end of the scythe, which he grasps convulsively, is ploughing a deep furrow in the ground. Then he sways and falls prostrate on the swath of cut barley.

"Is he gone?" asks Prillup with a smile on his wet face, when some ice-cold water from the well has revived him.

"He's gone," says Mari, hazarding a reply.

"Did you see him go?"

"Yes, I did."

His wife lifts him to a sitting posture. He looks around, wondering, like a stranger. Then he becomes conscious of where he is, and smiles a little shame-facedly.

"Where's my scythe?"

"Over there."

"Well, its time to —" But he cannot rise without Mari's help. And as he rises, his eyes open wide with wonder; how strong are the arms that are lifting his weight!

"No, no! You had better go home and lie down. I'll cut the barley alone."

"Nonsense! There's nothing the matter with me! Let me take the scythe."

But he is unable to pick it up, the scythe is too far. And when he bends down to take it, it sinks lower and lower; he can't reach it. Leaning on his wife, he goes home and lies down. Mari opens both windows and the door, for Tõnu complains that the room is pitch dark.

Having returned to the field, Mari calls Anni, who is at the neighbours' (it's Yuku's turn to herd the cow in the marsh today). She tells the girl to watch over her father and be on hand in case he should need anything.

In a little while Anni comes back and tells Mari that he has fallen asleep. "I put a cup of ale on the stool beside him. He drank and drank before he dropped off to sleep."

And with childish joy, Anni begins to rake the barley a little behind Mari. An hour or two later the child is sent home again to see how her father is. And Anni comes and reports: "I shut the windows and the door because he was shivering with cold." And then they work on till sunset, talking little, as befits serious workers. Anni in particular is very grave and quiet, fully conscious of her responsibility.

Prillup is still asleep when his little family gathers in the bed-chamber that evening. He is lying face upward, and they all notice how round and full his cheeks have suddenly become. His face is flushed a deep red which even shows through the beard. The hollows under his eyes have filled up.

"Tõnu, will you have something to eat?" asks his wife, waking him when supper is on the table.

"Something to eat? No," he says and opens his eyes wide. "What's the use of eating when we have no roof over our heads?"

Anni and Yuku turn simultaneously to look at their step-mother, who calmly puts her hand on the dreamer's forehead.

"I'll give you some milk. Will you drink it?"

Tõnu sits up, fully awake now, and takes the cup of milk.

During the first half of the night the fever rises and incites the sick man to make long animated speeches. Sometimes he speaks with his eyes

wide open, as Mari can see by the light of the little lamp she has left burning, and in his delirium he seems to be arguing with himself; at times his speech is sensible and coherent, then becomes twisted and meaningless again.

In his delirium he keeps harping on one and the same premonition, which he apparently cannot leave alone, and he attacks it from every angle. The point he always returns to is not the great vital issue of his life, it is something beyond that. It appears that he is in mortal fear of being evicted from his holding. He declares at times that he has already been driven from his little farm, for "the baron won't let anybody make a fool of him". At another time he is still expecting the notice to quit, and must needs go and look for a farm to rent in another parish; then again it seems the notice has come and he is unable to find a new place, for spring is near; again the situation changes: it is St. George's Day, Tõnu has been evicted and he does not know where to go with his "four children". The fourth child — Mari's white teeth flash — in her mind's eye she sees it in swaddling clothes.

These animated discussions are accompanied by wild gesticulations. His restless fingers have unfastened the buttons on his shirt. The little linen bag on a long string comes to view, and Mari fingers the little amulet inside. She slides the pellet out of its bag (the owner is still raving in his delirium) and she looks at it closely. But it is too dark in the half-light, so she slips out of bed and examines it near the lamp, rolling it on her palm. She smells it, scratches it with her finger nail and finally shrugs her shoulders in bewilderment, while her eyes look askance as she thoughtfully gazes at the tiny flame. Then she yawns and stretches herself, raising both arms high, and she is in danger of letting the funny peppercorn drop from between her fingers into her laughing mouth. Nothing happens, however, and she returns it safe and sound to the little linen bag on Tõnu's breast.

Before going to bed, she blows out the lamp, the flame is barely flickering anyway.

"Don't talk any more, Tõnu, try to sleep now!"

She says these words into his ear in a loud clear voice. And he obeys. He huffs and puffs for a while, then answers with a weak snarl before closing his eyes in sleep.

"Well — yes, but where will we find shelter tomorrow? All the cottages have been let already."

"Never mind, we'll find a place!" shouts Mari into his ear.

"Well yes — well yes —" The words die on his lips as he goes on mumbling and his limbs move convulsively. Then all is quiet in Prillup's cottage as in all the other Kruusimäe huts.

The cricket on the hearth begins to chirp, the cock in the loft crows, the dog outside growls in its sleep. Soon the great awakener will rise — in his own proper time.

Mari insists that Tõnu should not get up that morning, but by dinner time he drags his long-limbed body out of bed. He has never been ill in bed and he is ashamed to be seen there in broad daylight. And the work — tough and distasteful — gives him no respite, it must be done.

The fever leaves his blood, but the anguish lives on in his brain. He cannot get rid of that, it has eaten its way in deep, and the torment makes him fret in silence.

He doesn't try to sway Mari's judgement now. That stage is past. He got rid of the amulet when he abandoned his sickbed that forenoon. He suffers his tortures mostly alone, though naturally some words of bitter complaint fall on his wife's ears. And as the days go by, this happens more and more frequently, although she does not share his fears. Mari's simple childish mind does not believe that Tõnu will be evicted, nor does she suppose that he will have difficulty in finding a new place if it really should happen.

"You'd have to commit a very great crime for that man to evict you," says Mari. "He hasn't got that kind of face."

"You can never judge by faces, my dear," says Tõnu with a sad smile. "Lots of people have been evicted from here before our time."

"But not just for the fun of it?"

"Who knows what's fun and what's not in the eyes of the gentry? Landlords do as they please."

"There are other places where we can live, aren't there? This isn't the only one. We'll find something when the time comes," she goes on trying to humour him.

"Some miserable hut might be found somewhere, yes — but how shall

we manage? We have four mouths to feed, and in the spring there may be five."

"Not five, four most likely. But there are other ways of earning a living — all kinds of jobs in town and in the country."

"God save us! A truck-servant or a stevedore? Anything but that!"

It is no use. Tõnu's head droops lower and lower. He is sorry that he has spoken again — the words have worn thin.

And he goes so far with his complaining that on Sundays, when he meets his neighbours in the church square, he asks them if they know of some farm to let, although he has not yet received notice to leave. And when he goes to a distant fair together with the steward, there, too, he addresses some tenant-farmers furtively with the same question. And then, on arriving home he urges his wife to pay a visit to her old Forest home believing that she, as a native of that parish, would be more likely to hear of some good place that was vacant — they would hardly confide in a stranger.

"It's not necessary," Mari says, weariness lining her face. "Go to the manor-house and get the contract for the milk-carrying."

The silence that follows is not long. Prillup's hand stops in mid-air with a burning match between his fingers — but only for a brief moment — then moves up and lights the pipe.

"Why not — if there were a contract," he says between the first few puffs; the sucking lips form a weary smile round the stem of the pipe.

"Don't worry, it's there all right. He promised to have it ready by today."

Mari is making butter, the wooden spoon is busily churning the cream in the bowl. A speck of soot falls from the ceiling, Mari removes it carefully with the nail of her little finger, then goes on stirring again.

"Whose leg are you pulling?" retorts Tõnu. His glance slides away from Mari's expressionless face and rests on the frothing cream in the bowl, which is just as expressionless. And Mari's lips are silent.

Tõnu stands stock-still. After a time the corner of his left eye begins to quiver, the corners of his mouth begin to twitch, and the veins on both sides of his neck under his jaw contract violently making the lobes of his ears move. He raises one knee, intending to put it on the bench, but misses

and drops down on both knees in front of the butter-churner. His pipe falls down with a clank on the stone floor between them.

"Did you — — did you really — — —?" His words seem to melt in the fire that flashes from his eyes.

"Ah, don't, Tõnu! Don't!"

"But why — when —?"

Mari's face clouds a little. "That'll do, Tõnu — let me go on with my work."

When Prillup goes out of the door, he staggers from side to side as though his feet were trying to balance the weight of a heavy sack on his back.

CHAPTER TEN

An hour later Tõnu Prillup is sitting at the table in his bed-chamber, staring at the sheet of paper trembling in his hands. He has been sitting here reading it for a long time already without understanding a word, although he is quite able to spell out the handwritten lines. The letters are bold and clear, as if drawn with the end of a stick, but as soon as he tries to make out each word separately, the characters merge into a violet blur.

The children come and go, Mari comes in and goes out again. And the paper disappears like a flash under the edge of the table every time. And whenever Mari turns away, Tõnu's eyes furtively run over her figure.

It is a searching and admiring glance that he turns on his young wife; the more he looks the more he wants to see, and little by little he begins to marvel at what he sees. Prillup can't think where his eyes have been up to now. Mari has grown and matured. Tõnu's third child is no longer a child.

Mari has grown beautiful, over night. Has she found a magic well whose waters have worked such a wonderful change in her?

His eyes grow more and more avid as he drinks in every detail of her form and figure that seems to glow with a mysterious light, and suddenly the hot smoky bed-chamber (the rye has been put up to dry under the ceiling) seems to be filled with the heady scent of hidden meadow-sweet.

Tõnu's trembling fingers are still holding the paper with the writing in violet ink. But he doesn't look at it until he is alone again. And everything in the room suddenly grows dim. Big beads of sweat appear on his

skin, his face and neck are covered with them, they trickle down his nose and into his eyes. Those reddish brown eyes are now grey and lifeless. Some heavy drops of perspiration even fall on the sheet of paper in his hand.

When Mari comes in again, she sees a wretched man sitting at the table — his bubbling cup of happiness has been rudely upset.

"And she went and did t h a t — went of her own accord — in secret, behind his back — when he was far from home — when he had no idea — didn't even talk it over — didn't say a word, as if it had nothing to do with him — as if they weren't man and wife!"

"Well, yes, there was some talk sometimes — between ourselves — I even said I insisted — just in fun, like a joke, I thought — — it had a kind of attraction. But that she s h o u l d g o — that she s h o u l d really g o — —!"

Tõnu's hand falls flat on the sheet of paper on the table where he has thrown it down in disgust. But he doesn't raise his eyes. His abuse and insults are all directed towards the crack in the floor between his feet. He does not see her, but he knows: Mari is standing in the middle of the room — big and strong.

"Now I'd like to know how we are going to look each other in the eye? Who am I and who is she? What creature is it with whom I sleep at night and sit at meals? Where will you turn your eyes in the presence of other people? How am I going to sit beside her in church?"

The crack in the floor has no reply to Tõnu's questions.

"T h e h u s b a n d feels shame and she doesn't! She might have said all that to herself, she's not a child, she's grown up, and a woman. But she —! Up and goes! And when you take her to task, she stands like a wall and looks at you with a sneer!"

This was said at random; but when he finally raises his eyes from the crack in the floor and looks at Mari standing there, she is really laughing.

"And you may be sure I won't let you off as easy at that!" And Tõnu rises to his feet. "I demand an explanation! I want to know what you are! If you have a soul, why did you do that to me?"

"Wanted to," replies Mari.

Such an answer does not help him.

"You wanted to? Well, of course, otherwise you wouldn't have done it. What I'd like to know is: Why did you want to?"

Now the accused raises her arms high above her head and stretches herself. Baring her teeth she yawns a little yawn (or is it a smile?), then calmly turns and goes past the accuser to the cupboard, where she begins to rummage for something.

This annoys Tõnu. He hesitates a moment, then bursts out once more into a storm of blasphemy. His fury feeds on itself, he rages like a madman, giving vent to his anger in vile swearing such as never before had passed his lips. And when the flow of abuse runs out, he grabs his coat and cap from the hook, and panting rushes out into the rain and darkness — away from the filthy bitch.

Mari is asleep when he comes back, but she has not blown out the lamp lest he should stumble in the dark.

And beside the lamp gleams the sheet of white paper.

Mari is really sleeping, no doubt about it, and while Tõnu undresses, his gaze does not leave the carefree slumberer. He still looks at her intently when he sits down on the bench for a while — her tangled hair, the soft smooth neck and rising bosom, the shoulder, arm and hip — all the flowering beauty of her body which he sees or can readily visualize under the bedclothes. And again the growing awareness overwhelms him, more intensely than before, that she, whom he was wont to call his third child, has suddenly become a woman.

He blows out the lamp. And when he lies down beside his newly-discovered wife, his heart contracts in despair; and pressing her against his breast with his heavy bony arm, he pours his grief into her mouth, eyes and ears: "Wife, wife, why are you leaving me?"

At that self-same hour the candles in von Kremer's bachelor apartments are still burning. These last few nights many candles have been lit in his four rooms.

Herr von Kremer is in excellent health. He is in no hurry to go to bed because he wants to enjoy this new feeling of well-being.

With a springy step and a happy face he walks up and down the drawing-room with arms akimbo, or for a change he thrusts his hands comfortably into the pockets of his trousers, or strokes his grey tusks.

The music-box plays its tune on the corner table, and on the table near

the sofa sparkles a glass of red port wine, and from a plate a piece of rich yellow cake smiles to him.

From time to time the old gentleman seats himself in an armchair, sips from the glass and takes a mouthful of cake, and before he drinks the wine he never fails to raise the glass towards the mirror where his smiling reflection nods in reply.

His heart is all right, the unsound valve causes him no worry, his pulse is regular.

All evening the music-box has been tinkling away the mild and sweet melody of *The Last Rose,* that autumnally sad song meant for the lonesome listener. And every time that an extra strong surge of happiness stirs in his bosom, he raises his voice and bellows in accompaniment to the music:

Ist denn Lieben ein Verbrechen
*darf man nimmer zärtlich sein — — —**

The contract signed by Tõnu Prillup and Herr Kremer displays two faces now: one has a troubled expression, the other a happy one. And your mood, good or bad, depends entirely on which face you happen to see. On the days following his outburst, Tõnu took a look at the happy face for a change and was elated, and his heart was filled with peace.

In the first place, the man now saw clearly that he had been unjust to Mari. For, if she really took that step of her own free will, he owed her thankfulness; on the other hand, if she acted in accordance with the wishes of the powers that be, then it was so much more unjust to condemn her, for he himself had prayed for just that. And since Tõnu had no means to ascertain which of them, if any, had prompted Mari, he thought it best to be equally grateful to all concerned — to Mari herself, to the Virgin Mary, to the heavenly Father, and also to Mother Sutsu and the powers she served. The first mentioned were rewarded with a word of praise and a friendly smile, while Triinu Sutsu's wages turned out to be a goodly share of Tõnu's field crops. Luckily for her, the Kruusimäe fields yielded a fairly good harvest that autumn.

On the other hand, Prillup began to dream of the great happiness that the coming spring had in store for him. Eager to get a foretaste of the

* Is love a crime,
Is it a sin to be tender... *(German.)*

joys that awaited him, he often turned his steps in the direction of the manor milk-house, the herd of cattle, and the fields of the Kuru farm. What he saw there had been seen many times already, still it gave him endless pleasure to go and look again. Watching overtly or covertly, he could not help smiling as he stroked his beard with deep satisfaction.

The milk-house, the cattle and the Kuru farm — all these awaited h i m!

And Yaan does not even know.

Nor do the others know.

But when they once come to know — how they will stare!

Watching Yaan Kuru one evening starting on his way to town with a cart load of milk and butter, Tõnu, who is hidden behind a bush on the grazing moor, waves a farewell to him. He cannot help chuckling as he mutters: "For the time being, yes, only for the time being."

And when Tõnu reaches the Kruusimäe common, he makes a mock address to the cottages round him with a mischievous twinkle in his eye — an address that sounds as if he were just returning from a visit to the pub near the church:

"Oh you mole-hills, watch and wait! Only one from among you has been chosen for a rise, only one was considered worthy. The rest of you — go on scratching the dirt for a scanty livelihood, go on slaving in the fields of the landlord, and eat salt fish to the end of your days! Fortune smiles on the hairy one, the sleek ones must wait."

How Tõnu wishes that he would meet somebody on the way! He hardly knows what he would say, but he would certainly say something. He does not know what he would do, but he would do something. He would probably stick out his tongue and challenge them to match their strength in a tug-of-war.

At home Tõnu is affable and affectionate. Mari soon tires of his constant attentions and pushes him away with her elbow. But this does not discourage him, he takes it all with a good grace.

"I was in the stubble field today, where the herd was feeding," he tells her, "and I scratched the cows fore and hind, and they liked it. But when I touch you with the tip of my little finger, you start butting. When will you learn to live like the gentlefolk, I wonder?"

And then comes a day when Tõnu Prillup experiences a new, unique kind of joy, a day that heralds his future power more clearly than the white

paper with its violet characters which he now keeps safe between the leaves of the Song Book in the cupboard.

When Prillup goes to the manor-house that day to receive instructions about the barberry bushes that he was to cut down in the meadow, he finds the members of the household in the main corridor, one at each of the doors on the right hand side: the cook, Vilhelmine, is at the kitchen door, Mistress Reemet at the next one, and Reemet himself at the last one. They are all listening, pop-eyed, mouths agape with astonishment and dismay — even alarm.

Tõnu grasps the meaning of it at once. Angry words can be heard from the office, whose door is slightly ajar. As a rule Kremer is not one of those squires who rants and rages. He finds fault, but his reproaches are on the moderate side. Nobody has ever heard him scolding in anger: the state of his heart forbids him to fly into a rage. And now suddenly they hear his voice rising in anger.

"So y o u expect m e to thank you! That I should be grateful t o y o u and not y o u t o m e! Even if you did pay me in advance sometimes, you paid me with m y own money. If you lent me money, once in a while, it was m y o w n money you lent me! It's m y money that has made you stick your nose up so high! Without m y land and my money you, your wife and your children would be p a u p e r s. Thank God — — h o l d y o u r t o n g u e" (a loud stamp of the foot) — — "Thank God that I am not sending you away from the farm in short order. I am giving you fair notice — and now get out, scoundrel!"

The door flew open, and Yaan Kuru rushed out, his bald head the colour of beetroot. He actually brushed Tõnu's side as he passed, but he saw nothing, and on reaching the threshold, he put both hands on the jambs of the door for support lest he should stumble on the steps.

The other listeners have disappeared, Prillup presses himself flat against the wall, the door of the office is pulled shut with a loud bang.

Tõnu decides that he had better not go in for a talk with Kremer today and cautiously makes his way out of the house. As he strides homeward, his shoulders shake with suppressed laughter and one hand keeps stroking his beard. Time and again he looks back at the half-finished manor-house, the scene of such important events, and again a surge of chuckling shakes his body.

How he wishes that he were not alone on the road!

Ah, someone is coming! At the pasture gate he meets his neighbour, old Pajusi.

"Want to hear the latest news? — Yaan Kuru has been given notice! His milk-carrying days are over! And he is to give up the farm as well. It all happened just now. And what a rating he got!"

"So he's been given notice? — And he got a rating besides?"

"Yes, he threw it in the baron's teeth, the fool: 'So that's the thanks I get for lending you money, he said, and for paying you in advance!' And the baron let him have it, as if a thunder bolt had struck. The window-panes shivered. Who would ever have believed that Kremer had so much pep in him?"

"So Yaan's got the sack! And what's he blamed for?"

"Well, he's too s t u c k u p — s t u c k u p. The gentry can't stand a peasant getting s t u c k u p under their very nose."

"So Yaan's got the sack!"

"Yes, the sack, sure thing!"

And eye catches eye, and both eyes sparkle. Old man Pajusi forgets his errand and limps back with neighbour Prillup. Passing Liivak's gate, they see Mart standing in the yard. And they tell him the latest.

"So Yaan's got the sack, and with angry words?"

"Well, yes, the words were spoken i n g r e a t anger."

And now three pairs of eyes are sparkling.

"It won't do much harm to such a one as he."

"But still — he would gladly have raked together some more dough. And what a r a t i n g he got! 'Thank God you're being given fair notice to leave in the spring and are not chased away from the estate like a lousy cur.' And lots of swearing besides."

"Well, well, a man like Yaan can't abide such treatment. For him it's like putting a ring on a pig's snout."

And their eyes meet and smile, they feel warm in the pit of the stomach, and they talk on with gusto. Little Yüri joins them, as though enticed here by the scent.

"I wonder who's going to carry the milk now."

"And who'll be the new tenant at Kuru?"

At this point Tõnu Prillup raises his shoulders high, twists his lips

and drawls, almost like Yaan Kuru, in a sing-song voice: "Well, my good neighbours, it'll be someone chosen from among others, the one who has something put by, something saved up in his coffer, with God's help. And he may happen to have some rich relatives to help him out. The farm and the milk-carrying always go together, of course."

For the other three men this is not the main issue, however. For the time being, it is rewarding enough for them that Yaan will be dispossessed. They have envied him long, and all the time he has derided them and despised them. They had hardly hoped to see him fall into disfavour so soon. And now it is t h e i r turn to laugh — for once it is t h e i r turn. And when the four cronies go each their separate ways, the whole of Kruusimäe hamlet has a good laugh, and later Altküla village too. Not only the cottars, but also the local tenant farmers chuckled with pleasure.

In the meantime Tõnu crosses the pasture on wings of delight and smiles in anticipation: the best card of all is still up his sleeve.

But that will have to wait awhile so that the connection will not be too obvious, so that they won't begin nosing around. Kremer also thinks it will be better to wait a bit. And when the time comes — what long faces they will pull!

And Tõnu leans on the fence and tries to picture the expression on the faces of his neighbours, changing the cadence as he keeps repeating to himself:

"So that hairy Prillup has taken over the milk-carrying. Didn't you know — haven't you heard? That hairy Prillup has taken over the milk-carrying and the Kuru place will be his to farm, too!"

How fortunate that today Tõnu so aptly thought of hinting to them about savings in the coffer and about rich relatives. That was a lucky stroke! They would certainly recall his words when the time came. So, let them shake their heads and wonder — who would be the wiser? They'd never know how much he or his relatives had saved up. But there was no one there that day to hear their patron say:

"Well, if you really need the money and can't get a loan from anybody, I'll lend you some myself."

Well, well! But Tõnu needn't worry, he needn't even go and bother his relatives. And it would be of no use if he did. For all his own as well as his wife's people belong to that station in the social scale which Yaan

Kuru designated as beggars, although some of them, like Mari's father and uncle at Ruisu, and Tõnu's brother-in-law in the other parish were farmers in a small way already.

Tõnu needn't worry and in the evenings he can play on his mouth-organ — a passion that recently awoke in him all of a sudden. The rusty little instrument had been unearthed in some forgotten rubbish. It is perhaps a relic of his childhood days; and now hardly an evening passes, but that he sits near the stove and playes it dreamily, evoking sleep in his listeners. Mari and the children are tired of hearing it, but Tõnu does not tire of playing it. To him it seems to be a substitute for thought and speech. His former pastimes, and the Bible, too, have all retreated into the background before this little metal hummer.

One evening, when her stepmother had put on her best dress in the barn and gone out, Anni could endure it no longer. With tears welling up in her eyes she went and pulled the little instrument from his mouth.

"Don't play any more! Don't! I'll be sick if you do."

Tõnu's head jerked to left and right, as if he were waking from sleep, unconscious of what had happened. Then he saw the eyes full of tears in the pale little face. He laid his big bony hand on her head and said:

"No more, no more tonight — now we'll do something else."

Yuku, yawning, appeared from a corner and stood at his father's other knee. He was pot-bellied, his legs thin, his voice low.

"Where did Mari go?" he demanded.

"Mari — well — Mari went to the neighbour's — to some neighbour's — Yes, children, now we'll do something funny — something really funny." And Prillup laid his right hand, also big and bony, on the boy's head.

"To which neighbour's did Mari go," asked Anni, whose lips were still trembling.

"Your mother — yes, mother went — mother went to Tiits's place — — Listen, let's play noughts and crosses — what do you say if we begin with noughts and crosses — — Yuku, where's your slate?"

But Yuku did not budge. His low voice insisted nervously: "When is Mari coming home?" And Anni, who had inherited her father's brown eyes, said, "Why did she go out so late?"

"No," said Prillup, avoiding their eyes, "I don't think noughts and

crosses is such a funny game after all. I'll make shadow animals on the wall for you. Well — yes — mother — she'll come soon, she had an errand — But you just see, when I've put the lamp in the right position — —"

And on the lighted wall appear black rabbits and calves, piggies and sheep, who eat and moo, and burrow, and jump. And cocks shake their wings and crow, dogs sit up on their hind legs and bark, oxen butt each other, and cats catch mice. And he makes many other animals do funny tricks on the wall.

And this shadow-show goes on and on until Yuku falls asleep right on the floor and Anni aches with weariness, and outside it is so dark. Large beads of perspiration gleam like pearls on their father's brow, while his hands still twist and turn and make magic, as if they were straining to cast off their invisible shackles.

At last Anni falls asleep on the bench, but the shadow animals go on living.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When the new milkman of Mäeküla took his place among his fellow tradesmen on the market place, they had no fault to find with his outward appearance: his hair was cut, and a brand new pair of black boots adorned his feet.

"Nothing doing," said the man to himself when he noticed the frowning scrutiny of the other milkmen. "No home-made raw-hide sandals, and no long hair, either. You expected to see another country bumpkin — they're all the same at Mäeküla, you thought. But you're mistaken, the new one might teach y o u a trick or two, but he's got nothing to learn from you."

The new milkman let them assess him from all sides — there was nothing that would disgrace the trade: his suit was new, and the scarf round his neck was cleaner than most. Then their glance took in the waggon and the horse, and the wooden vessels — perhaps here was something to sneer at? But wrong again! Not many of them had such a well-fed nag between the shafts, and the waggon wasn't half bad, and the casks had come straight from the cooper's. The new Mäeküla milkman had begged the old one to sell him his vessels, but Yaan had refused point blank, out of spite, most likely. He'd need them for his own milkman later on, he had said. Well, there was nothing for it but to buy new ones. It was only right that a new tradesman should begin his business with new equipment.

And these others needn't suppose that he is much behind them in the tricks of the trade, either, such as politeness and alacrity. Why, he seems to know exactly whom to accost as "madam" and whom to address as

"miss", just as they do, and he is quite adept in saying "thank you" when receiving the money, and to the well-to-do customers he even makes a little bow. And while praising his butter, he offers his clients a taste. As for the milk, he gives full measure and a bit over. It may be that at the beginning the buyers are obliged to wait behind his waggon a little longer — he is not so quick yet at handling his wares, nor at counting the money — but never mind, he'll soon master all that. The others were glad, no doubt, when, on the first day, a pound of butter slipped through his fingers and plopped into the mud; and on the first day and on the second, too, he had misunderstandings with a few customers in giving change. But if his much respected fellow tradesmen would take the trouble to recall their own first day at the market — perhaps they wouldn't have so much reason to smirk and sneer.

But concerning the great popularity of Mäeküla milk and butter that Yaan had boasted so much about — well, on that score, as Prillup soon found out, the man had exaggerated most shamelessly. There were a few who asked for "Mäeküla", and looked at the new man doubtfully, but there certainly was no rush of customers to his waggon as Yaan had intimated: and besides Tõnu had difficulty in finding a purchaser among the shopkeepers along the way, who was not already engaged in selling the wares of some rival milkman. As was to be expected, the former Mäeküla milkman had not introduced the new one to his steady customers, nor had he shown him the places where he delivered milk, so at the beginning the new one failed to find shops who would buy the milk that was left over at market, and he was obliged to sell it in the streets, at a lower price, of course. And in disposing of his butter he had the same trouble.

Every beginning is difficult, but Prillup was sure he would soon know the ropes. As for the low demand for Mäeküla milk and butter — well, he'd find a remedy for that, too. Just wait and see!

There was another drawback, as Tõnu was to learn soon — the nightly trips to town that he was not accustomed to. He would set out from home when it began to get dark, and as the roads were bad, he got sorely bumped and knocked about in the waggon loaded with heavy casks. He would spend part of the night at some wayside tavern not far from town, and these were always noisy and full of tobacco smoke; and from there he would have to start out again early in the morning so as to reach the

market place by six o'clock. From town he would start back at about noon with the same thirty versts of bad road to travel. As a result, he practically got no sleep at all, except when he dozed in the waggon. His eyes were red-rimmed and his ears were badly bruised by the casks.

But in spite of everything, Tõnu's joys outweighed his little sorrows. What satisfaction it gave him to work in the milk-house side by side with his wife, to take the milk over from the dairy-maid, to skim the milk, to churn the butter and pack it, to pour the milk into the casks — that alone repaid him amply for any annoyance. And then, slashing the whip, to ride out of the manor farm-yard with the loaded waggon, to set off from the gate of the Kuru cottage on towards town. And back home again with a bulging purse! Not to mention the thrill he got from the selling of his wares at market, even from the bargaining with butchers about the price of a calf in the threshing-shed of some tavern, for they are in the habit of meeting the milkmen on the road at night on their way to town. And added to this — the pleasure of tilling the fertile soil of the Kuru fields and living in the more spacious rooms of the Kuru cottage, which is not so old.

Yes, Tõnu is perfectly satisfied, he has no regrets.

Now Tõnu i s somebody — he has already become somebody, though as yet he is not in a position to buy an estate, or even a farm. He became a somebody on the day he moved into the Kuru cottage and was named the new Milkman of Mäeküla Manor.

Were Tõnu himself, by any chance, unaware of his new status, he could not fail to read it in the eyes of everybody around him; and wherever people are uninformed, he makes a point of acquainting them with the fact, so that he s h o u l d b e respected — to that he has a full right. He does not impose himself on anybody, certainly not, only he takes advantage of every opportunity to introduce himself as the new Milkman of Mäeküla Manor. At first there are bound to be lots of people on the way to town or to church who are still ignorant of this fact.

Moreover, he is anxious that everybody should see how well his business is thriving, especially the people in his immediate vicinity; so he takes to practising certain habits peculiar to the old milkman, by which the latter was recognized everywhere: he begins to roll his head and raise his nose. By this he doesn't want to seem prematurely boastful, he only wants people to understand that he is steadily advancing towards prospe-

rity, and most likely it is taken in the right spirit. And if they do nudge each other and smile, it is perhaps because the new one has not quite mastered the skill yet: the beat is irregular, the rhythm not so pleasing to the eye. As formerly, the milk-maids in the farmyard watch the new milkman approaching over the Kuru hillocks, his head nodding and rolling, his nose making the sign of the cross in the air. But they can't help noticing, one and all, that something is lacking — it is not the thing. And some are of the opinion that the new one will never master the art, because an artist must be born an artist.

The final goal of his endeavours is not quite clear yet to Tõnu himself. He hopes to get that point straight in a year's time, perhaps, depending on what Yaan does. By St. George's Day Yaan has bought no estate, nor has he appropriated any farms — the time had been too short to find anything suitable. He moved to the next parish, where they were living temporarily with his wife's relatives.

And Mari, apparently, is also satisfied with her new life — apparently, because she is not in the habit of expressing her thoughts in words. Her mother used to say: "Mari has only one friend in whom she confides, and he lives in her skull."

Mari seems to be satisfied, for she works with a will and is more diligent than she used to be, especially in churning butter, which is her favourite occupation in the milk-house. During the first six months at least she does not once lay her hands in her lap and say, "I don't feel like working today." She already is fully aware of the fact that the dairy business must be kept going, and when there is danger that the farm work is going to interfere with the work in the milk-house, she gets her younger sister from Ruisu to come and help, although she is not fond of bothering other people, as a rule, even her near relatives.

What satisfies her most of all, evidently, are the trips to town by train which she can sometimes make now, and with a well-lined purse. Returning usually by noon on the following day, she brings the children wonderful new stories about musicians who can play so that your heart wants to jump out of your breast, about actors who talk and do everything that is written in books, about horses who dance and trot to music, and riders who do awe-inspiring tricks on horseback. Her words conjure up visions of ships from foreign countries, massive grey walls with imposing

towers, immense churches with glittering altars, squares and boulevards full of gay, light-hearted people — and she makes the pictures so vivid, the children feel as if they had seen these wonders with their own eyes.

Since the young wife now has more money to spend, she never comes home empty-handed. She has a weakness for nice shoes: before winter comes she has bought herself three pairs of footwear. Nor does she forget the son and daughter. She doesn't care what she wears or how she adorns her head — her purse would not allow so much at once, but in the matter of shoes she is very particular, and it is not easy for her to pass a shop-window where shoes are on display. And she procures a bigger lamp for the living-room, a clock and a good mirror, and she makes coffee on Sundays and the appropriate cups and saucers find their way to Kuru's, which is now their home. New books appear on her shelf and the young wife is sorely tempted to subscribe to a weekly periodical next year, having brought home some odd numbers which have all been read to tatters by herself and the children.

Prillup does not approve of all Mari's purchases, saying they are unnecessary luxuries — her predecessor had no such weakness — but he doesn't argue with her. Why, he is getting on pretty well in his business, and perhaps it is for the best that there should be evidence of their prosperity in other things, too, besides the raising of his nose. And after all, he doesn't follow Yaan Kuru's example so closely himself, either: he wets his whistle on the way to town with something stronger than Yaan had ever done, and he often smokes a cigarette instead of his old pipe now. These are temptations he cannot resist — well, yes, temptations, just as shoes in a shop-window for Mari.

The third party in the agreement is also satisfied.

If it should occur to anybody to look at him attentively, he would find that the old man is becoming rejuvenated. The skin on his cheeks is clearer, if not smoother. He walks without that clumsy swaying gait, neither hands nor stick support his back, and his step is free and easy. Moreover, with a surer glance and a keener eye he now sees much that is new to him in his old familiar surroundings.

Yes, all is different now, for Kremer roams in a world painted in bright colours. Recent impressions, each fresher than the one before, have brightened his surroundings, flashing coloured light over everything. Life

is not only livable now, it is sweet and beautiful. And he appreciates its fresh beauty the more when solid reality takes the place of fading recollections, when he quivers with anticipation of the appointed day and hour which are near, when a certain knock sounds on a certain window, or when the door bell of his secret refuge in town rings in a certain way. Then Ulrich's hand presses his heart, where the unsound valve is supposed to be, and he wishes he could live for ever, or at least as long as grandfather Götz von Kremer, who had lived one hundred and three years, four months, two weeks, five days, nine hours and twenty-eight and a half minutes.

In this new world people are kind. Whoever turns to the Mäeküla baron now with a grievance, is sure to find a sympathetic ear, a kind heart and an open hand, the more so if the supplicant is a tearful representative of the weaker sex. To one he promises an extra piece of meadow-land to make hay, to another he gives permission to cut faggots, to a third to fell timber; and if a peasant's stray colt or heifer is caught in a grain field, the owner gets off with only half the fine, and Kai Karits is said to have cried until he reduced her rent by a rouble or two. But Tiiu the dairymaid beat them all: her tears won her a husband.

One day during the midday milking, Herr Kremer had noticed that Tiiu had wiped first one cheek on her sleeve, then the other. He passed her a couple of times, then touched her on the shoulder.

"What's the matter, Tiiu?"

The girl raised her head, a sob escaped her lips, and the tears streamed down her face.

"Mistress Reemet knows." And she cast a furtive glance in the direction of a little dark woman who was milking a cow not far off.

Herr Kremer went and asked Mistress Reemet, the steward's wife.

"Yes — Reemet was to come to the office about that affair this very evening." She motioned the master to step aside, where she continued in a subdued voice:

"I talked to her privately and asked her on several occasions what was wrong with her. But she always answered obstinately that nothing was wrong, until yesterday, when she came in, wiping her eyes with the corner of her apron. So I asked her again: 'Well, Tiiu, what makes you so sad?'"

"Tiiu stood for some time, crying, and didn't say a word. At last she blurted out: 'What have I to rejoice about? I'm going to have a baby soon.' Well, I said, that's no misfortune if the father is willing to marry you."

"'That's the trouble — he doesn't want to. His mother won't let him.' I asked her if it was Ketas. She was almost choking: 'Who else can it be! And now he's trying to lay the blame on Peeter. But Peeter — he's so shy —'"

"'Well, you know best,' I said. 'When Reemet comes in I'll tell him'."

"'Please help me,' she begged. 'Whatever my reputation may be, I'm good enough to be Ketas's wife anyway.'"

"Well, Reemet scolded him good and hard in the evening, but the boy wouldn't listen to him. It's not him, he insisted. Tiiu goes around with young men from the manor and from the village. Who knows? And he's clear of all blame. Reemet is not the man to get the better of such as he. That remains for Herr Kremer himself."

"Do you believe the girl speaks the truth?" asked Kremer. And Mistress Reemet gesticulated with head and hands to show that she had no doubts whatever on that score.

"In that case Ketas will have to go and propose to her this very day." And he went straight to the little dark woman who was one of the milkers.

"Did your son come home to dinner, Truutu?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell him to come to the office on his way back to work."

Mihkel Ketas soon appeared in Kremer's office. He was the lad who lived with his widowed mother in the bath-house on the premises of the manor. He was short and stocky with bandy legs and black hair. But he was not alone, his mother was at his heels.

Kremer pushed her back from the threshold. "You are not wanted here!" But that did not prevent the woman from speaking out in the corridor what she had intended to say in the office. She was so loud and noisy about it that Kremer opened the door and ordered her out of the corridor.

"Listen, Mihkel, I've been told that you live an immoral life. How dare you live an immoral life here on my estate?"

The boy's dull eyes looked at the landlord sulkily.

"You must not live an immoral life here on my estate, everybody must

live a respectable life, that is God's order and the landlord's. Don't you know that?"

Silence.

"Do you go to Communion?"

"Yes!" sulkily.

"How often?"

"Twice a year."

"So you go to Holy Communion, but do not fear God. You live on the estate and under my roof, but you don't fear the landlord. Tell me now, what must the steward do with such as you?"

"I'm not the father."

Kremer pierced him with his eyes, subdued him with his voice. "If the girl says that you are the father, then you are the father!"

Here the young man seemed to wake up. First with one hand and then with the other he rubbed the legs of his trousers, twisted his shoulders and smacked his lips. "No, I'm not! — I'm not — Not in this world — do what you like — I'm not the father!"

"Well, if I discharge you from my employment this minute, and send you and your mother out of the bath-house without notice — are you the father then?"

Mihkel rubbed his nose and rolled his eyes, his voice had already lost some degrees of certainty.

"No, no, I'm not the father — I am not! As if there weren't any others."

"Listen, Ketas, to a few words of advice —" And Kremer pressed two fingers on the boy's shoulder as he said in a more friendly tone: "Take pity on the poor girl. What will become of her and the child? She has no parents — —"

Ketas looked down at the floor.

"Why don't you want to marry her? She's hard-working and she's healthy."

"She's old — and my mother doesn't like —"

"Look here! Now you have acknowledged the child as yours. You don't like Tiiu only because she's a few years older than you and because she doesn't please your mother, not because the child is somebody else's. But if she suited you before, she must also suit you after. And if she suits you, she must also suit your mother."

"But it's not my child anyway."

"But you'd marry Tiiu in spite of that so as not to lose your bread, wouldn't you? I'm not joking — you'd go this minute! And the girl will go to the law."

Mihkel was on the point of giving in. His gaze began to waver, it travelled upwards from Kremer's boots towards his face, when suddenly his mother's voice reached his ears again. She had thought it best to stand and listen under the window of the office, and from there she shouted:

"So that's called righteousness in this world! All the whores will get married that way. Goes to bed with a young man, and when the deed's done, then someone is taken by the collar, the one who hasn't been out of his mother's sight for a minute. Yes, that's the way it is! And nobody believes my boy, but whatever that old bitch says is true! And the boy is pinched as if he were a criminal. She can point at anyone she likes! Why, the poor boy may say anything out of fear — but it's not right. I ought to know better than anybody else, but I'm turned out!"

The woman's black head disappeared when Kremer approached the window. Again the boy was adamant. He would stake his head, he said, but he was not mixed up in this affair.

"All right," said Kremer and took his watch out of his pocket. "By five o'clock the bath-house must be empty and both of you gone from my estate. And if I owe you anything in money or in kind — I'll consult my books — you'll get it from the steward. Farewell."

Mihkel hesitated, but turned slowly towards the door. He had a feeling that he had already received all his earnings and taken something in advance. He reached the door and put out his hand to take hold of the latch. In the meantime the landlord had seated himself at the desk, mumbling into his whiskers:

"I might have given you one of the Kruusimäe cottages in spring, but seeing you are a scoundrel, you can go and walk the roads."

And Mihkel did not leave, his hand did not lift the latch. His big bluish ears, flat against his head, seemed to be listening attentively. He looked sideways at the speaker for some time as he turned slowly, and then suddenly he made a clumsy bow.

"Honourable sir — I'd like to ask my mother."

"Be quick then!" shouted Kremer, opening a big ledger.

The boy was gone, but in two minutes he was back. He was still on the threshold when he said, "Well, I agree to take Tiiu."

"All right." And Herr von Kremer shut the ledger.

"And that cottage at Kruusimäe — —?"

"You'll get it."

When the Squire of Mäeküla strolled among the cattle during the evening milking, one of the milkers suddenly rose to her feet and, in full view of the other milkers, seized his hand and kissed it without saying a word.